

BACCANO!

1931 Another Junk Railroad: Special Express

RYOHGO
NARITA





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**RYOHGO
NARITA**
ILLUSTRATION BY
KATSUMI ENAMI



Hospital

"Hyaa-haah!"

"Hyaa-haah!"

"It sure sounds nice and peaceful over there."

Chaini and her little follower were being their usual noisy selves, and as I watched them out of the corner of my eye, I let out a quiet sigh.

The cargo-retrieval team had it way too easy. They've got no idea what kind of trouble we had to slog through.

Jacuzzi was hurt real bad, but they weren't worried for long. The second they knew his life wasn't in danger, it was back to business as usual.

But we all went through the wringer on that train. Miz Nice and I got tied up, and Jack got worked over, and Donny had to push all the cargo off by himself.

"What's got you so grumpy, Nice?"

"Ah, I'm just jealous is all. Picking up girls on the job sounds like a sweet deal."

Not to mention the doll they brought back is real bad news. Now it's all a big mess.

She was one of the terrorists, and she fights like a monster. Jacuzzi doesn't have a clue, so he's smiling away. Should I tell him about this or not?

"-Hell, this hospital's pretty weird, too."

Why is one of those white suits working as an assistant here? Even the old doc has a few bats in his belly, all wrapped up from head to toe in gray cloth like that.

But I guess that's Jacuzzi for you. He can find a way to smile even now—well, as long as he can see Nice.



While I was mulling over the situation, the guys from the recovery team were rolling their eyes at us.

"Geez, you people were living large on that fancy train. We had it rough. Kidnappers and big ole monsters and military guys..."

"Mm-hmm. Gangsters, too. It was tense for a whole seven hundred and twenty-three seconds..."

"-juh!" I frowned. They weren't making any sense.

"C'mon, wipe that look off your mug. She's gonna be my little sister one day. Look at her, she's gorgeous! It's good for the soul."

One guy twisted my head, making my neck crack and forcing me to look at the terrorist.

Her face really was as pretty as a white lily—but she had an icy gaze that chilled me to the bone. Those eyes were glaring at me.

In that moment, all I could do was smile, which was what my buddies had planned on, sort of.

She was so scary that smiling was the only option, dammit.

Speakeasy

I've been working here for a while, and let me tell you, men are all kids. Even men in the Canorra.

She's a child at heart, herself, but even she's more mature than them sometimes. That boy comes in twice by from time to time—he's a lot more down-to-earth.

Well, the customers this place gets are all odd ducks, you know, but all the regulars here are like sons to me.

And that includes Mr. Molis and Old Yaguruma. I swear, men keep a kid inside them forever; they're constantly making extra work for other folks. They're hopeless.

And don't get me started on Firo; just watching him is embarrassing. Ennis is more laid-back, though, so I'd say they're a good match.

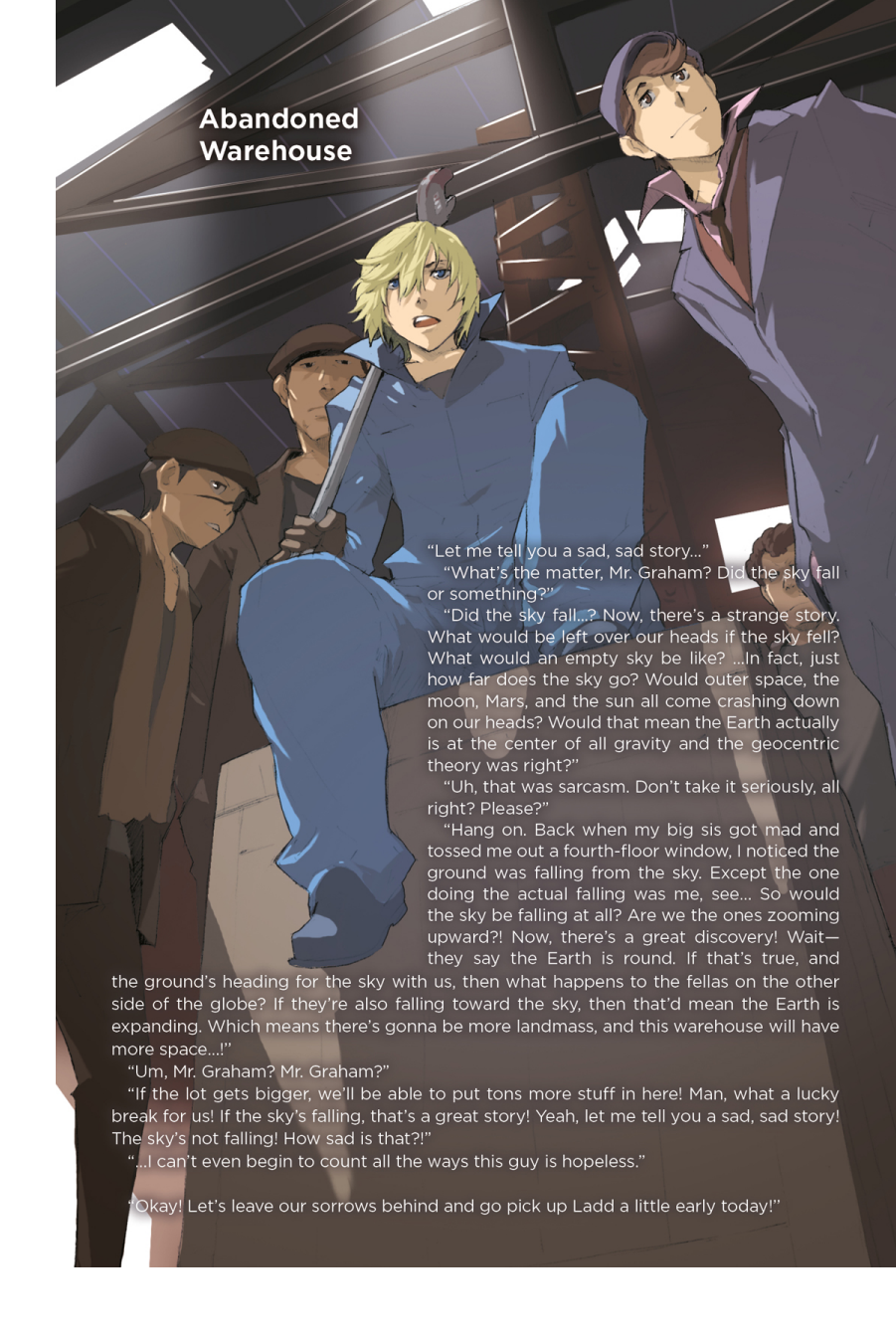
Come to think of it, remember that carrot-top who came by a little while ago? He was acting like a big shot, talking about who knows what, but deep down, he was just a kid, too. You could tell from the look of him... I think he's probably a hitman or something like that.

Even if they're the president or the best boxer in the world, to a woman, all men are kids on some level.

And the ones who hang out here are real good-for-nothings, and that infantile core in them is the only thing that's grown.

They're all problem children, but honestly, that's what makes them so cute.





Abandoned Warehouse

"Let me tell you a sad, sad story..."

"What's the matter, Mr. Graham? Did the sky fall or something?"

"Did the sky fall...? Now, there's a strange story. What would be left over our heads if the sky fell? What would an empty sky be like? ...In fact, just how far does the sky go? Would outer space, the moon, Mars, and the sun all come crashing down on our heads? Would that mean the Earth actually is at the center of all gravity and the geocentric theory was right?"

"Uh, that was sarcasm. Don't take it seriously, all right? Please?"

"Hang on. Back when my big sis got mad and tossed me out a fourth-floor window, I noticed the ground was falling from the sky. Except the one doing the actual falling was me, see... So would the sky be falling at all? Are we the ones zooming upward?! Now, there's a great discovery! Wait—they say the Earth is round. If that's true, and

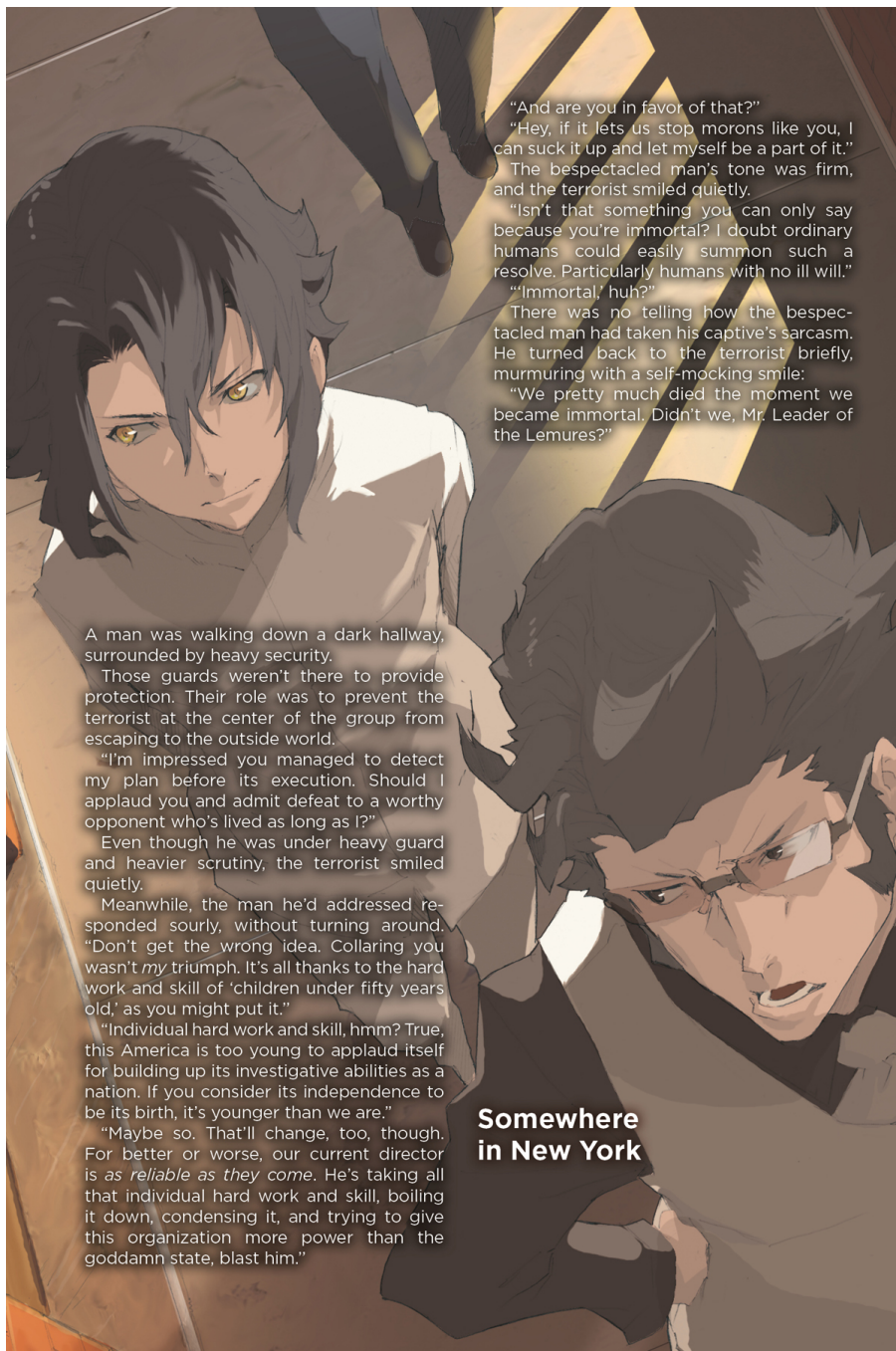
the ground's heading for the sky with us, then what happens to the fellas on the other side of the globe? If they're also falling toward the sky, then that'd mean the Earth is expanding. Which means there's gonna be more landmass, and this warehouse will have more space...!"

"Um, Mr. Graham? Mr. Graham?"

"If the lot gets bigger, we'll be able to put tons more stuff in here! Man, what a lucky break for us! If the sky's falling, that's a great story! Yeah, let me tell you a sad, sad story! The sky's not falling! How sad is that?!"

"...I can't even begin to count all the ways this guy is hopeless."

"Okay! Let's leave our sorrows behind and go pick up Ladd a little early today!"



"And are you in favor of that?"

"Hey, if it lets us stop morons like you, I can suck it up and let myself be a part of it."

The bespectacled man's tone was firm, and the terrorist smiled quietly.

"Isn't that something you can only say because you're immortal? I doubt ordinary humans could easily summon such a resolve. Particularly humans with no ill will."

"Immortal, huh?"

There was no telling how the bespectacled man had taken his captive's sarcasm. He turned back to the terrorist briefly, murmuring with a self-mocking smile:

"We pretty much died the moment we became immortal. Didn't we, Mr. Leader of the Lemures?"

A man was walking down a dark hallway, surrounded by heavy security.

Those guards weren't there to provide protection. Their role was to prevent the terrorist at the center of the group from escaping to the outside world.

"I'm impressed you managed to detect my plan before its execution. Should I applaud you and admit defeat to a worthy opponent who's lived as long as I?"

Even though he was under heavy guard and heavier scrutiny, the terrorist smiled quietly.

Meanwhile, the man he'd addressed responded sourly, without turning around. "Don't get the wrong idea. Collaring you wasn't *my* triumph. It's all thanks to the hard work and skill of 'children under fifty years old,' as you might put it."

"Individual hard work and skill, hmm? True, this America is too young to applaud itself for building up its investigative abilities as a nation. If you consider its independence to be its birth, it's younger than we are."

"Maybe so. That'll change, too, though. For better or worse, our current director is as *reliable as they come*. He's taking all that individual hard work and skill, boiling it down, condensing it, and trying to give this organization more power than the goddamn state, blast him."

**Somewhere
in New York**

TERMINAL—PREQUELS

CHILDHOOD PAL

SMILE AND MALICE

THE MAN KNOWN AS HUEY LAFORET



CHAPTER 1

INTERLUDE

CHAPTER 2

INTERLUDE

CHAPTER 3

INTERLUDE

CHAPTER 4

INTERLUDE

CHAPTER 5

FINAL CHAPTER

DIGRESSION
& TERMINAL

THE RECOUNTED WORLD 1

TIPS—HUEY AND CHANÉ

THE LONELY WORLD

TIPS—CHILDHOOD PAL

THE FUN-YET-SAD WORLD

TIPS—A COUPLE THE NIGHT BEFORE

THE TRAIN'S ARRIVAL

THE INVERTED WORLD

TIPS—THE IMMORTALS

MY WORLD

THE RECOUNTED WORLD 2

THE LINKING WORLD

BACCANO!

1931 Another Junk Railroad Special Express

VOLUME 14

RYOHGO NARITA

ILLUSTRATION BY **KATSUMI ENAMI**

**YEN
ON**
NEW YORK

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BACCANO!, Volume 14: 1931 ANOTHER JUNK RAILROAD: SPECIAL EXPRESS

RYOHGO NARITA

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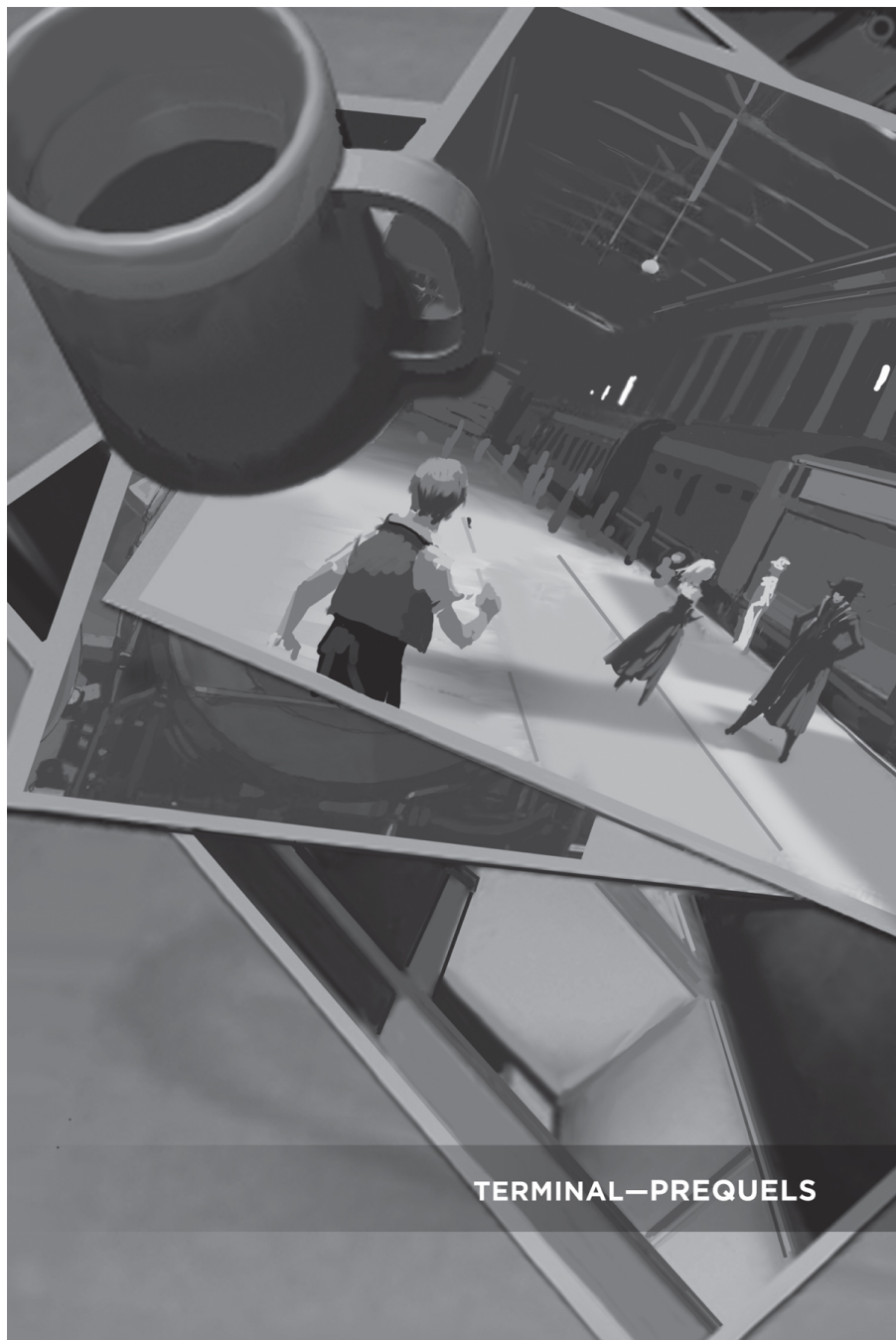
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TERMINAL—PREQUELS

Terminal—Prequels

Childhood Pal

December 29, 1931 Somewhere in Chicago

“Hey, Who. Got anything going on tomorrow and the day after? Betcha don’t.”

“?”

Somebody had called me Who, as in *Who are you?* right in the middle of town, and as I turned around, I imagined the face I was probably about to see.

And I was right.

“What is it, Ladd? Maybe I don’t look it, but I’m a busy guy.”

“Don’t be like that. I bet your kind of ‘busy’ means thinking about what to have for dinner or something—that’s all.”

“Unlike you and your rich family, I’ve got practically zero income. Maybe you don’t know, Ladd, but we’ve been in a depression for a couple years now, and I’m worried out of my skull that I’ll starve to death one of these days.”

I’d meant that as sarcasm, but that jerk nodded, cackling away.

“Oho. Come to think of it, out of all the ways you can buy the farm, they say starvation’s one of the nastiest. It ain’t my favorite way to kill, though. I mean, c’mon. After a while with an empty belly you start to think, ‘Oh, I’m gonna die.’ I can’t get jazzed over killing fellas like that. Know what I mean?”

“I hope you’re not expecting a yes.”

Ladd Russo.

I know a lot of unsavory characters, but there’s really, truly no hope for this guy.

I mean, he’s murdered a ton of people.

He’s the lowest of the low—a murderer who revels in it.

Your average dumb kid might stop to question why killing people is wrong, but not Ladd. I tried to talk sense into him from that perspective before, but...

Well, of course it ain’t okay to kill people. Our brains are built to hate the idea. In war or self-defense, you might be able to fight that feeling off

[illegible]

...That's what he had to say on that. He'd busted up laughing, and that was it.

Geez. He's hopeless.

A blank-faced, gun-toting kid wondering why they shouldn't kill is adorable compared to him. I mean, when you act on that impulse, they get their elbows checked by the sheriff and hauled off to jail or the hangman.

But Ladd's already killed a lot of people—and it doesn't seem like a sheriff will ever catch him.

Any regular sheriff would probably get shot and killed by him instead.

Ladd.

The trouble with this guy is that he's under the protection of a mafia syndicate, the Russo Family.

From what I hear, he's famous as their top hitman, but hitmen really shouldn't be famous... That makes no sense.

That said, he's only acting as a hitman to satisfy his bloodlust. The syndicate cleans up all the bodies for him. That's exactly why he's using his family to get a kick out of life. He said so himself a little while ago.

Meanwhile, I've been getting pulled into his ugly messes for ages, all because this fella and I go way back.

Every time a group of Ladd's buddies marched me off somewhere, they'd ask me "Who're you?" so somewhere along the way, my nickname had become "Who." Even Ladd started using it, and he

should know my real name. I wasn't okay with that, but I knew he wasn't the type to listen to anything I told him, so frankly, I didn't care anymore. Nowadays, I've started to get pretty attached to the moniker myself.

Plus, Ladd's buddies were all as psychotic as he was.

A few years back, they had a bet on whether Ladd could sock a guy in the Nebula headquarters building—the chairman of that huge corporation—and he bulldozed his way into that skyscraper to do it.

I was worried just being around those guys would get me in hot water with the cops.

In the end, nothing happened (I dunno what went on in there, but both Ladd and the Nebula chairman are still alive and kicking), so all's well that ends well. I'd steeled myself anyway; I was positive I was going to die right there.

Sometimes, even when you're just living your life and minding your own business, a flowerpot falls on your head and kills you.

On days when I was around guys like Ladd, the Grim Reaper kept on advancing toward me.

I probably stuck with him anyway because I wanted to at least try to keep his rampages to a minimum. Not that I could actually stop him.

If I left him alone, there's no telling when he'd set Chicago on fire. I categorically refused to die because he dragged me into a mess.

“So if I say I don't have any plans tomorrow, then what?”

It was going to be something dumb.

I already knew that, but I decided to hear Ladd out anyway.

Ladd put an arm around my shoulders and whispered, his eyes shining like a kid who just got his allowance.

(“Let's go pull off a lil' trainjack, all right?”)

See? Completely dumb.

“No. And actually, don't pull a birdbrained stunt like that,” I told him flatly.

Ladd ignored my input, though, and started explaining his cockamamie plan, thumping me on the back the whole time.

“See, tomorrow, this ritzy train called the Flying Pussyfoot is coming to Chicago. We're gonna hijack it a little, kill half the passengers, then kill the other half and crash the train right into New York... Whaddaya think? Nifty plan, huh?”

“Tell me what I could possibly get out of that.”

“C'mon! You can't waste your life thinking about what you're gonna get out of it. Sometimes you've gotta make a move, even when you know it's gonna cost you... And that time is obviously now!”

There's making no sense, and then there's Ladd.

Ladd's energy nearly swept me away, and I struggled desperately in an attempt to escape the current.

"Listen, Ladd. I've got nothing going for me. You drop me into a trainjack bloodbath and watch what happens. I guarantee one of your stray slugs is gonna send me to my maker. Even if that doesn't happen, try stirring up trouble in a train that's going about sixty miles an hour. I could stumble headfirst into the coal furnace and go up in flames, or I could slip and fall onto the rails, get caught up in the wheels and ground into hamburger! A strong passenger could break my neck; I don't have the muscles to fight. Or maybe that Rail Tracer urban legend will eat me headfirst, or I could drop dead of a heart attack from all the stress! The world's dangerous enough as it is, so why should I voluntarily go somewhere that's gonna get me killed?!"

I was panting after that little rant, and then Ladd had the nerve to say, "Y'know, I think that extreme fear of death you've got is really something. I mean it. I respect you as a person."

"Then quit with these screwy rampages already."

I paused for the space of a breath, then mentioned a certain woman's name:

"I don't want to end up like Leila."

"..."

Leila.

The moment her name came up, Ladd stopped moving, if only a little.

A long time ago, that would have been enough to put the brakes on pretty much any rampage, but—

"Hey c'mon, Who. It ain't good to let the past tie you down like that. When are we living, huh? Yeah, that's right. Now. Looking back is important, but you can't let memories trap you. We have to keep our focus on the future. Ain't that right?" Ladd had come out with a speech that sounded almost inspiring, and then he smiled with something close to ecstasy as he murmured, "Yeah... I gotta do it for my future with Lua. For our quiet little marriage together."

I give up. Medicine's come a long way, but there's no cure for stupidity.

"...And anyway, if you're planning some rough work, invite that fella who's in New York. Uh, what's his name...? You know; the one with the big wrench."

"Oh, that *kid*? *Graham*? No can do. You can count on him, but just try getting that guy all worked up on a train. He'd take the whole thing apart before we got anywhere."

"I did drop him a line, though. I'll break the people, he'll break the stuff. I'm already looking forward to that party, trust me."

As it turned out, I ended up going along on that ridiculous train ride.

I tried talking him out of it for close to three hours, but then he kept pestering me. When it was all said and done, the conversation took a solid four hours total.

Apparently, no matter how I tried to stop him, he planned to smuggle shotguns and other weapons to hijack that train. The odds of the passengers' lives being spared were probably about fifty-fifty.

I went along with it because I was worried about him: If he was going to pull a dumb stunt, maybe I could stave off the worst of it... But I know there's no excuse. If I was worried, I should've stopped him, even if it came to blows. I wasn't brave enough to have a fistfight with Ladd, though—that's all.

In other words, I was a moron, too.

Just in case, I purchased my ticket separately from the rest of the group so that people wouldn't think I was with them. If we got surrounded by cops, I'd have to strip off my white jacket and tell them, "You've got the wrong guy; my clothes happened to be the same color...!" It would make me a yellow-bellied coward, but dammit, what else was I supposed to do?!

If I ended up unable to stop them, I'd have to get away somehow, even if that meant jumping off the train.

.....

Technically, I could report this to law enforcement now.

But if I did, I'd probably die.

I wasn't worried about Ladd pulling the trigger. He said some messed-up stuff, but once he decided you were his pal, he'd never kill you.

Even so, there's a reason I was always afraid for my life around those guys.

The only one with that policy was Ladd.

The day I was dumb enough to squeal on them, Ladd's buddies would hack me to pieces. If I was real unlucky, they'd say I caused trouble for the Russo Family, and Ladd's uncle, Don Placido, might even torture me to death.

Ladd always says, "There's no reason I ended up like this. I was born screwy."

Yeah, the guy maybe was a natural murderer. I couldn't think of any trauma that would have made him a homicidal maniac, so I wouldn't deny it.

But I did have an idea about why he killed folks who thought they

couldn't possibly die yet.

Leila.

Her death probably caused this.

She went down way too easily.

And...it might have been partly my fault.

The bottom line was—

—the next day, I would board that train.

I would help out with that birdbrained trainjack.

.....

It was an excuse.

All that talk about mitigating the damage was nothing more than an excuse.

I couldn't afford to take my eyes off him, that's all. It was like I had a duty to watch him.

The past had tied me down. It was exactly like that jerk said—I was the one who was bound to Leila. Damn it to hell.

I couldn't ignore this and run. I couldn't stop him, either.

I just stood there, shaking, and watched him kill people.

So many thoughts ran through my head, but in the end, there wasn't anything I could do except start getting ready for the next day.



Several months later Somewhere in New York

Yeah, back then...I had no idea things were going to end up that way.

I thought maybe I'd end up kicking the bucket or the passengers would die, but—

Who'd have thought Ladd and Lua would fall off the train together, and I'd be the only one to make it safely to New York, alive and a free man?

That train was abnormal.

That night was abnormal.

They were abnormal.

All of it was just...abnormal.

...I'm not saying I wasn't.

There's no way anybody normal would pal around with Ladd.

But still...something was off there.

I'm still mulling over exactly what it was, even now, while I work as an assistant to this crackpot doctor.

Ladd got hurt real bad, and lots of our pals died, and yet here I am living free and easy...

I guess I really am a coward with a few screws loose.

Smile and Malice

December 30, 1931 Chicago Union Station

As a blustering, cold wind howled across the station platform, an imposing train sat proudly on the tracks as if to protect the passengers.

This was the Flying Pussyfoot.

As far as trains went, it was a definite oddity.

Its basic build was modeled on England's Royal Train. The interiors of the first-class compartments were all embellished with marble, and the second-class compartments were designed to match.

On regular trains, each car was divided into sections ranging from first through third class. As a rule, the third-class compartments were located above the wheels, where the vibrations were strongest.

However, this train's basic structure diverged from that standard.

Its cars were split among first, second, and third: Immediately behind the engine came three first-class cars, then a single dining car, three second-class cars, one third-class car, three freight cars, and one car that housed a spare freight room and the conductors' room.

Because of unpleasantries like smoke, first-class cars were generally located near the end of the train. However, this particular train turned that common practice on its head.

With the exception of the dining car, all the cars had a corridor on the left side in relation to the direction of travel, and passengers entered each compartment after checking the number on its door. Three cars with oversize freight rooms also had a corridor on the left.

It was an ostentatious nouveau riche train, one that prioritized form over function. The drab third-class compartments, which had been made almost as an afterthought, instilled a vaguely unpleasant feeling of inferiority in their passengers.

The sides of the cars were ornamented with flattened relief sculptures that further underscored the train's affluent leanings.

This train's biggest feature was that it was independent from the railway company's regular operations. It "borrowed the rails" from the railway company, and it could have been called a modern-day Royal Train.

Certainly, in this era of economic depression, the only ones able to ride a train this grand were individuals who could ignore the financial circumstances around them—the modern analogues of royals or

aristocrats.

On December 30, 1931, a tragedy would unfold on board this luxury train...

Some passengers would hardly be mentioned later.

One of them took the place of a lucky couple and stepped into the tragedy.

Smiling and smiling...

"Now, wait a minute. Even if we turn around and go home, they won't give us a refund for those tickets."

"Better than losing our lives, isn't it?"

An elderly couple who seemed to be well over fifty were walking quickly in front of the train.

The old woman was hurrying from the station without looking back, almost fleeing from it, while her husband followed close behind and tried to keep her from leaving.

"I admit your instincts have never been wrong. But still..."

They had originally been planning to travel to New York on the Flying Pussyfoot. But just before they boarded, the wife had said, "On second thought, we should stay."

"Something bad is going to happen on this train. I can feel it."

Her instincts had always been preternaturally sharp, but simply taking that statement on faith required a little courage.

That was how expensive the tickets for this train had been.

"Erm, but..."

"If it's about the money, don't you worry. I'll pay out as much as you like from my nest egg."

"N-no, it's not about money or anything! It's just..."

While the old couple was arguing—

—a man stepped in to block their way.

"Excuse me."

"...Yes?"

The elderly couple gazed dubiously at the young man.

He was a very average-looking person of medium height and build.

His smile was striking, and although there was no telling what he was happy about, his expression softened in an approachable way as he spoke to the couple.

"I overheard you earlier... If you don't mind, I'll buy both those tickets from you."

"Huh...?"

“Well, it sounds as if you don’t want to waste the cost of the tickets, sir, and you don’t want to ride this train, ma’am. Meanwhile, I’d like to ride, but the tickets were all sold out... You see? This will solve all our problems, won’t it?”

“...”

His smile was sincere and held absolutely no ill will.

Yet the elderly woman found that very lack of malice especially eerie.

“I think it’s a terrific plan that will leave all of us smiling!”

“W-well, but this train is...”

Now that they had the opportunity to sell their tickets to a stranger, his wife’s statement that something bad was going to happen on the train concerned the husband. That said, he wasn’t sure whether or not to tell this person about the situation. While he hesitated, his wife turned to the young man and explained for him.

“You may not believe me, but...I have a terribly bad feeling about this train. There may be an accident or some other dreadful tragedy. If you don’t mind risking that, then...”

Her remark sounded like superstitious nonsense, and the young man responded with a mildly surprised “What?!” Then, after a brief silence, he nodded, still smiling. “In that case, please do let me buy them. Absolutely.”

“Huh?”

“After all, if there’s an accident, more people might survive with one more capable body on board.”

It sounded almost as if the young man was implying that an accident wouldn’t affect him, and a strange feeling came over the old woman, but—

Seeming embarrassed by her gaze, the young man spoke to her.

“You may not believe me, but...the thing is, I’m not human.”



Meanwhile Outside Chicago Union Station

The man stood.

And that was all he was doing.

When seen from behind, he lacked any other characteristic one could use to describe him.

Like air or light, he blended into the cityscape without seeming the slightest bit out of place.

It was as if he'd always existed at that spot since the creation of Chicago, or maybe of the nation of America, or perhaps even of the planet Earth.

A short distance away from the stationary figure, a white man and a brown-skinned woman were talking in an automobile.

"...I won't take the train after all."

"Oh, are you sure? But you splurged and bought a second-class ticket... There's no telling if you'll ever get another chance to ride the Flying Pussyfoot, you know."

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"I see..."

The black-haired man was solemn, and as his companion murmured to him, she smiled voluptuously.

Possibly because he'd remembered he had better plans, the man had abruptly declared that he was canceling his train journey.

"—Yeah—sorry—so—setta—"

"—Jacques—too—ful—just—"

The couple's conversation turned into fragmented snatches that the wind caught and carried away into the hustle and bustle of the town.

When he heard that piecemeal conversation, the man who had been an unobtrusive part of the scenery began to move.

"A second-class compartment... Hmm?"

He was moving, yes, but it might have been more accurate to say that he "began to creep."

The man who'd completely melted into the background began walking toward the station with a thick, dark aura around him. His steps were natural to an unnatural degree, and he didn't leave a trace of his presence behind.

Like a crow gliding through darkness without letting himself draw attention, the man moved on quietly.

However, there was one striking thing about his face: His bangs rested barely above his nose, hiding his eyes from view.

For an ordinary person, that would have been an extremely noticeable feature, and yet the fact that he didn't let others see his eyes seemed to erase any impression he might have made.

Skillfully blending his sticky, mud-like aura into the air around him, the man began to walk with a certain goal in mind.

Unnoticed by most, a lone man slipped onto the train.

...His malice was not grand, but like a bottomless swamp.

The Man Known as Huey Laforet

December 1931 Somewhere in New York

“How does it feel to be both a bastard *and* an idiot?”

The space was a claustrophobic one, surrounded by sturdy stone walls and an iron door.

One institutional table sat in its center, flanked by two chairs.

These were the only furnishings in the room, and it definitely counted as “bleak.”

As one of the two men in the room complained with characteristic coarse language, the other opened his eyes, still sitting in the chair in which he’d been placed.

“...Wasn’t the interrogation supposed to take place after we reached the New York Department of Justice?”

The room created a mute pressure that might have crushed the spirits of a timid individual if they so much as stepped inside. And yet, even after half a day here, the man spoke in a perfectly calm voice.

Meanwhile, the overbearing man who’d barged in to join him shook his head.

“The Department of Justice is only interested in the terrorist activity. The inquiry I’m about to conduct isn’t going into any records except the one in my mind. Whether I fabricate anything is entirely up to me, and how many years you spend in a dark jail cell after this depends on how straight you are with me here. Keep that in mind and start singing.”

“You haven’t changed, Victor... You’re as verbose as ever. Intentional fabrications aside, I doubt your brain is capable of accurately remembering what I say in the first place.”

“.....! ...Oh, no you don’t. If you think you can get intel out of me by pushing my buttons, think again.”

Victor’s face flashed through a dizzying series of expressions before he finally settled for haughtily pushing his glasses back into place.

“Provocation was not my intent; far from it. I merely thought back over what I know of you and offered an objective opinion—”

“Anyway!”

Raising his voice to drown out the other man, Victor dropped heavily into the other chair.

“Lemme ask you again: How do you feel, Mr. Terrorist? Not only did your plan get the kibosh before it happened, but that was quite an arrest.”

“I suppose a terrorist would be expected to reply that this is the worst that could happen, but as Huey Laforet the individual, I don’t feel anything of the sort.”

“I see. In that case, I’ll make sure wherever you end up after this is the worst experience you’ve ever had.”

In response to Victor’s taunt, Huey sank into thought. Then, after a short silence, he gave his answer.

“I’m not so sure. To date, my worst memory is of the time my mother sacrificed her life to clear her name after being accused of witchcraft—which led to similar accusations and executions for many people I loved. Following that, it’s the memory of being unable to save my wife’s life back in my hometown.”

“...Hey.”

“And yet you claim the ability to leave me with a memory more painful than those. It’s an interesting proposition in its own right. What exactly did you have in mind? Could you share the specifics? And as for whether that despair will prove greater than the loneliness of the *thousands of years* in my future, only time will tell...”

“...”

Huey’s words completely silenced Victor.

Victor Talbot.

He was a member of the Bureau of Investigation—the federal organization that would later be known as the FBI—and he worked as the vice director of an extraordinarily unique section.

The man who sat in front of him was a terrorist who had purchased a large number of weapons and seemed to have been plotting some sort of destructive act.

Huey Laforet.

He was a criminal who led an armed group known as the Lemures, and it was rumored that he had several other hand-raised organizations.

The two men faced each other from completely opposite positions, but they had one important characteristic in common.

A characteristic that fell outside the scope of natural law, and it wasn’t something an observer could detect with a casual glance.

Immortality.

This word, most often found in fairy tales and Grecian myth, was

a simple descriptor of what these two possessed.

The men were fellow alchemists who had been on board the same ship in 1711.

On that ship, they had summoned a demon and obtained the elixir of immortality. If they had told others about this, most people would have assumed they were hearing one of the thousand and one tales told to the king of the desert.

In truth, they had indeed survived to the present year of 1930. That long span of time had changed their respective positions into completely different things.

After the silence had gone on for a little longer, Victor sighed deeply... And then, finally, he spoke to his comrade.

"...What is it with you and Elmer anyway? Is everybody from Lotto Valentino a little cracked? You talk about your worst memories as if you're reading a history book...and Elmer actually smiles when he does it!"

The place, Lotto Valentino, and that name, Elmer, had come up abruptly. However, when he heard the latter, Huey's expression turned human for the first time.

Up till then, he'd had a faint, doll-like smile pasted on his face, but now it shifted into a *distinct smirk* that, while subtle, felt faintly human.

"Well, Elmer is crazy, you know."

"What, and you're not?"

"It's true; Elmer is a lunatic, and his apparent normalcy makes him all the more troublesome. Everybody mistakes his lunacy for goodwill. They don't notice the horror in the hand he extends to them."

"Ha! So, what, you were only pretending to be buddies with him?" Victor mocked, but Huey seemed mystified.

"Why would you think that? Elmer was and is my best friend... although it's too embarrassing to say these things to him directly."

"You sure don't look embarrassed. You're telling me you're friends with a nutcase?"

"Yes, and that's exactly why. I doubt I could end our relationship even if I wanted to, however. His warped convictions are the one thing that will never change, no matter how the world changes. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that they'll never be mended... To me, his nature may be what the North Star is to a man out on the ocean."

The terrorist responded evasively, shaking his head as if to say the conversation was over.

Victor seemed to have gotten the message. He clicked his tongue

lightly, then waded into the main subject.

“So what exactly were you trying to pull, baiting those humans with the power of immortality? Poor kids, they don’t know that you get sick of living for eternity inside of a hundred years. I might understand if you were trying to start a new religion, but you stockpiled weapons... Were you playing Crusaders or something?”

“Putting it that way is an insult to the Crusaders. Besides, you don’t need to ask; you already know what I wanted to do. You and I are far from friends, but I believe we understand each other fairly well.”

“An experiment, huh?” Muttering irritably, Victor pulled out some documents and slapped them down on the table. “These turned up at your place. You recognize them, I’m sure.”

“Well, well. These are...”

The documents that had been laid out in front of Huey included several photographs, blueprints for a variety of things, and written explanations of how they functioned.

“See, I figured this evidence would tell me about your plans, so I went through it all with a fine-tooth comb... What the hell is this stuff? Flying battleships? Boats with huge wheels? Bird-powered airplanes? Talking clocks? Dolls? You’re going to tell me, right now, what kind of code you’ve got buried in these bullshit blueprints.”

“Code? There’s nothing of the sort. These are exactly what they seem. They are the products of our venerable forerunners when it comes to invention, despite their being born after us. Every article was designed in the nineteenth century, and several have been created already. You must have seen talking clocks yourself, Victor.”

“... Nobody cares about that! Why did you have blueprints for that at your place, then? Huh?!” Victor yelled, his face beet red.

In response, Huey gave a mechanical smile and answered impassively.

“It’s a hobby. None of these ever would have occurred to me. Appreciating unique ideas like these is a modest pastime of mine. People themselves may not interest me, but the ideas they create are fascinating... I suppose you could call it a flaw of my personality.”

Huey’s lips curved in a faint smile. Even as he sensed something eerie in the man, Victor let his words go in one ear and out the other, then tried to pin down their essence.



“Well, la-di-da; good for you. I shouldn’t expect anything from you. Still, some of those blueprints look pretty dangerous. Take this portable flamethrower here; using one of those in real life would get ugly.”

“Oh, that’s one I drafted myself... I made a prototype for it the other day.”

“...What?”

“I may have designed it due to some sort of emotional trauma regarding the burnings during the witch hunts. Perhaps it’s an inversion of my hatred.”

“What are you talking about? You made that? There was nothing like that anywh—”

“I assumed that was what you were here to ask about.”

The remaining composure drained from Victor’s expression.

As he opened his mouth to ask another question—

—the door to the interrogation room opened, and a man who seemed to be Victor’s subordinate ran in.

“Edward? What’s up?”

“Well, sir...”

Shooting a glance at Huey, the young agent leaned in close to Victor’s ear and gave a terse report.

Victor’s temples tensed, and he plastered a strained smile across his face in an attempt to keep his cool.

He was trembling faintly. Observing him with interest, Huey impassively asked him, “What’s the matter, Victor? Is there some sort of problem?”

“...I can’t believe you, you damn bastard.”

“Beg pardon?”

The terrorist’s mechanical smile seemed deliberately inflammatory at this point. The Bureau of Investigation executive smiled back, his face tight, and explained to the criminal what had happened in something close to a snarl.

“They tell me your favorite flunkies took hostage a transcontinental express, the Flying Pussyfoot...and they’re demanding your release.”

“Oh my.”

“Don’t give me that! No, I get it. I thought you were way too relaxed. This was your game, huh? You finally decided to pull ordinary citizens into it. Don’t you think you’re selling us short, pal?”

“I didn’t order this. They must have taken action independently because they wanted me returned.”

“What the hell difference does it make?! You’re the one who put that damn group together! When you create an organization, you’re

responsible for it, and when the leader's a skunk who thinks of the humans below them as guinea pigs..."

Ignoring Victor, who kept rattling on, Huey let his thoughts drift to the Lemures' rampage, which he'd half anticipated.

Well, given what I know of Goose, I suppose this was inevitable.

Now, then... What move will you make, Chané?

The state isn't likely to acquiesce just because you have hostages.

You aren't an immortal.

Will you cling to your loyalty until the police take your life...?

Will you act separately from Goose and the others...?

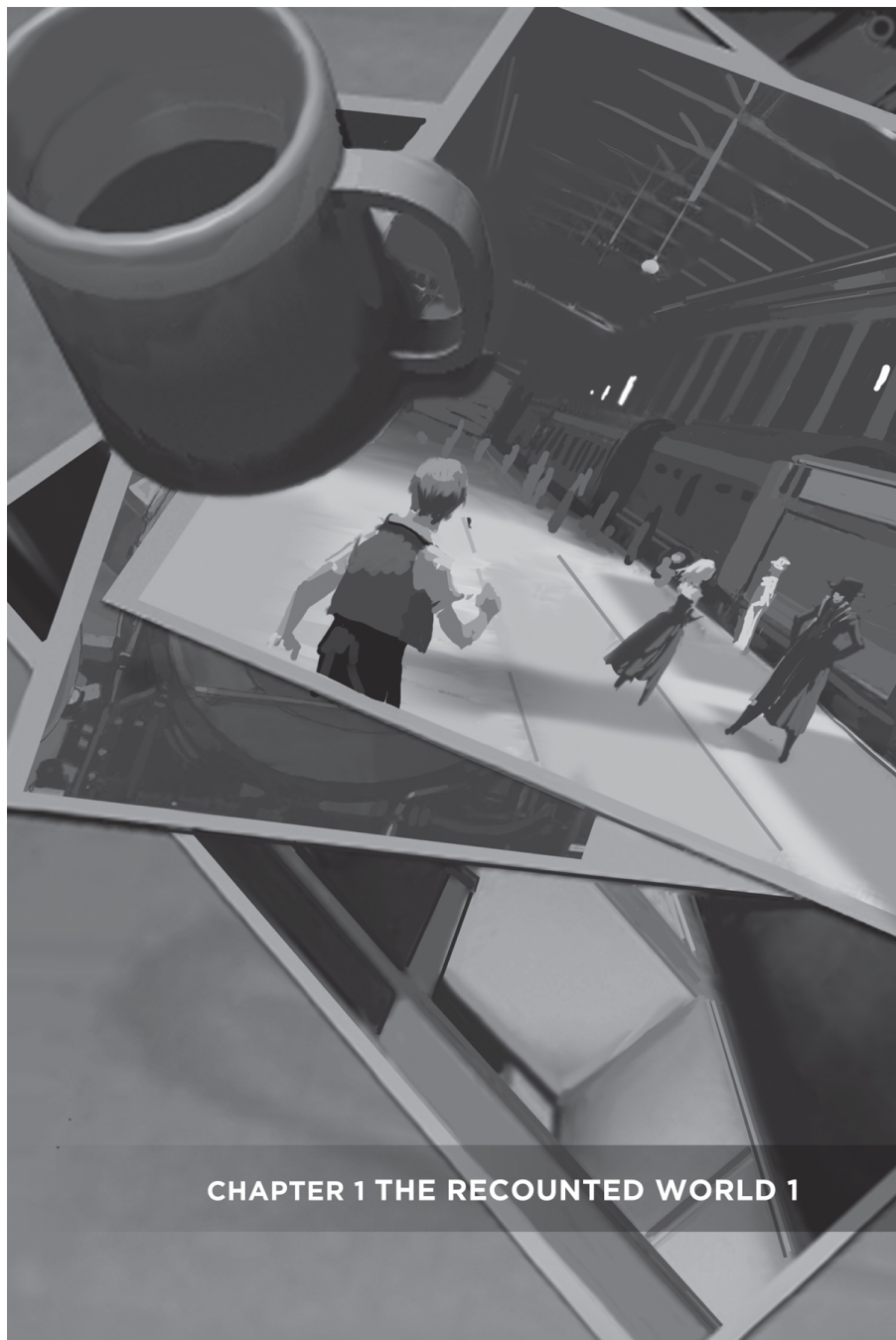
Will you give up on me and walk a different path?

...Or maybe this will play out in a way I haven't even dreamed of.

You are my daughter, Chané, but sometimes you act in ways I can't anticipate.

As his thoughts went to his distant child, Huey laughed silently.

You really are the ultimate test subject.



CHAPTER 1 THE RECOUNTED WORLD 1

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THE RECOUNTED WORLD 1

1934 In a train on the transcontinental railroad

“Ooooooh, Vice President! A rainbow! It’s a rainbow!”

A child’s shrill voice echoed in a rather small space.

The girl’s fingertips traversed the window frame rhythmically, in time with the train’s vibration.

She probably wasn’t fifteen yet, and her small body was full of that youthful energy. Around her neck was something one normally wouldn’t expect to see on someone so young—a professional camera like the ones journalists might use—that highlighted her adolescence even further.

It certainly wasn’t a toy. Its black-and-silver Leica body created a sense of solemnity about her—a solemnity that the girl herself ignored as she grinned artlessly at the rainbow.

Despite her enthusiasm, though, there was only one other person there to see it.

Her only companion inside the first-class compartment of a train speeding over the transcontinental railroad bound for the West Coast was a grown man who sat across the table from her, a newspaper open in front of his face.

Even with only two occupants, though, the room felt a little cramped.

The window frame was beautifully carved, but the curtain was cheap fabric with an overly ornate pattern printed on it, and although the compartment had chairs, a bed, and a table, it didn’t seem all that spacious. As a matter of fact, the no-frills interiors of the second-class compartments made them feel larger than that of the first class.

This was probably the sort of train that prioritized transporting people rather than providing a high-class, enjoyable trip. In fact, the fare for a first-class compartment was about half of what it was on other trains.

Even so, as far as ordinary people were concerned, the cost was quite extravagant enough.

“Heh-heh. A rainbow... A rainbow is indeed a wonderful thing,

Carol. Its mere existence is enough to soften a heart..."

The man still had the newspaper open in front of his face, and he almost seemed to be talking to himself.

"An enormous yet simple work of art, drawn in the sky like the work of a child. What is it about them that captivates the human heart so?"

"Mm-hmm! You're so right!"

As the girl innocently bounced in her seat, the man slowly folded the newspaper. Then he went on, lowering his voice.

"However... Hmm. Carol, from the time we are children, we think of that rainbow as something beautiful, without a doubt in our minds. Why is that?"

"Huh?! Why...?"

Carol turned to stare curiously at the man.

The figure that had emerged from behind the newspaper belonged to an individual in his prime, with keen eyes.

At first glance, he seemed young, but his hair was sprinkled with gray, and it was hard to get an accurate picture of his age. His eyes gleamed as sharply as a hawk's, and he wore a monocle over the left one. The slant of the light made it gleam like a mirror, and in the convex lens was a warped, upside-down reflection of the girl's face.

His clothes were dapper, and the umbrella beside his chair created an additional sense of class. In combination with his brand-name clothes, he seemed like the central figure of a wealthy financial group. This made the sharp, villainous glint in his eyes feel all the more out of place. Anyone who saw him would not soon forget him.

Tossing the newspaper onto the table, the man moved his naked right eye, gazing at the colors outside the train.

"After all, something colossal appeared in the sky. To people who aren't familiar with the concept of the refraction of light, it must at times seem to herald a catastrophe. As a matter of fact, in some parts of the world, rainbows are taken to be precisely that. Perhaps that rainbow is a path for ill omens, or the vegetation at the foot of that arc may have burned away. It wouldn't be at all unnatural to imagine these things... Why are we capable of seeing fairy tales in this strip of seven colors? Have you never thought about that?"

"Nope."

"....."

"I can think about it all I want, but I'd never come up with an answer. Besides, our job isn't to think. It's to tell people what really happens! Isn't that right, Vice President?"

The girl's remark was rather precocious in the face of such a complicated discussion. Her smug smile was evidence that she was proud of her answer, but it only emphasized her childlike demeanor.

The vice president smiled quietly at her, then shook his head.

“Hmm... That merits 319 points, at best.”

“Huh?! ...Out of how many?!”

The unfair statement bewildered the girl, and the vice president went on soothingly.

“True, our job is to convey the truth to people. However, whether it is truth or a fabrication...we must not stop thinking the moment we obtain information. We cannot determine whether it is true or false and then let that be the end of it. That is the responsibility of those who deliver information to others.”

It was a grand statement, but Carol wasn't convinced, and she lined up arguments as soon as she thought of them.

“But what are we supposed to think about? Thinking won't change the truth.”

She was probably annoyed that the comment she'd been so confident about hadn't received full marks. The man parried the girl's contrariness with a gentle smile that didn't match those sharp eyes.

“Ah, but it does change it. This isn't strictly about the mind-set regarding rainbows that I mentioned earlier, but... Depending on how you think about them, past truths can transform in any number of ways, and it even becomes possible to change truths that have not yet occurred.”

As the vice president spoke, his hands were folding the newspaper in a series of odd moves, almost as if he was creating a large origami object.

Carol had no idea what he was making, and besides, she seemed too absorbed in the conversation to give much thought to the newspaper.

Across from the girl, the vice president's hands and mouth continued to carry out their separate tasks, as if they didn't belong to the same man.

“For example... Let's see. If you know the events leading up to a fact, or the causes directly before a result, you can change that result as much as you like. You discover the value of information only after you've obtained it, when you think about it with your own mind...and your own heart.”

Even as his hands fiddled with the newspaper, his speech was completely smooth.

The girl tried to argue back against that clever statement—but before she had a chance, something unexpected happened.

“In other words—”

As the vice president spoke, the pair started to sense something odd in the corridor.

Just as Carol began to hear some sort of scuffle outside, the door

next to her flew open—

—and from behind it appeared several men with scarves wrapped around their lower faces.

They were dressed like typical bank robbers, the sort that appeared in the talkies, and they instantly changed the elegant atmosphere of the first-class compartment into something barbaric.

“Eeek!”

The intruders had appeared far too suddenly, and Carol shrank back in spite of herself. She didn’t know who they were or anything about them, but in response to the abrupt change in the atmosphere, her body had stiffened up in a noticeable way.

In contrast, as if he were a clockwork machine, the vice president raised his right arm above his head in a fluid motion.

He was holding the newspaper, which had been folded into a strange shape.

Before the intruders even noticed the movement of the vice president’s arm, they tried to announce themselves: “Okay, folks, don’t try anything funny—”

With the speed of a spring-loaded device, the vice president’s right arm snapped down.

Air became a burst of sound.

A dry, loud *bang* echoed in the compartment as if a firecracker had gone off.

The sound thundered violently in their eardrums, and Carol and the men flinched, tensing sharply.

“Whoa... Wha...?”

All the men had knives in their hands, but they’d forgotten why they were there, and their gazes wandered around the room. They were searching for the source of the roar in the narrow compartment, but they didn’t see any likely firecrackers or guns.

As he searched for what had caused the noise, the one member of the intruders’ group who’d actually stepped inside blinked twice, and in that moment—no sooner had he felt the pressure on the backs of his knees than he tipped wildly off-balance.

“Huh...?”

The ceiling came into view, then immediately receded.

Just as he caught sight of his friends’ upside-down faces, something struck the back of his head, and pain and darkness enveloped his mind.

The last thing he saw was a black shadow that rose from his chair in a leisurely way, threw a wad of newspaper right at his friends’ faces, then violently struck at their chins from above it.

“H-huh?”

Carol had curled up into a ball at the sudden noise and watched the whole sequence through her fingers, and she wouldn't forget it for some time to come. Even though her mind had been relatively clear, she still didn't understand what had happened.

“Wh-what...did you just do?”

She had simply been watching.

Immediately after that loud sound rang out, the vice president had grabbed the tip of the umbrella that had been leaning against his chair and hooked its curved handle around the ankles of the man who'd entered the compartment.

The robber had neatly tumbled over while the vice president had risen to his feet, thrown a wad of newspaper at one of the two men in the corridor, and then immediately landed a strangely executed uppercut on that man's chin with his full body weight behind it.

The man had risen into the air for a moment, and though the third man was distracted by the sight, he'd tried to turn the revolver in his hand on the vice president. But before he could pull the trigger, the vice president's hand had covered the magazine and squeezed the body of the gun as hard as he could.

Since the cylinder couldn't turn, no bullets were fired. The vice president plucked the gun from the man's hand easily before slamming a rough kick into the region between his legs.

The man crumpled instantly, eyes rolling back in his head, and as simple as that, the vice president had subdued the three intruders.

In the end, Carol hadn't been able to do a thing. Before she even had time to scream, silence had returned to the compartment, as if nothing had happened. The attack was over before it began.

“Um, a-are you okay, Vice President?” Carol timidly called to her companion.

The man nonchalantly slipped the handgun he'd taken into his own jacket. Then, although his eyes were still sharp, he smiled at the frightened girl.

“My apologies. I turned the newspaper into an origami popgun and blinder before you had a chance to read it... However, unless that shock ripped it apart, it should still be legible.”

“Uh, uh-huh...”

“Yes, and so, to return to what I was saying... In short, I used the information I had obtained to predict that this situation would occur; therefore, I was able to be fully physically and mentally prepared during the crisis.”

The vice president had spoken casually, and for a little while, Carol thought about what to comment on first. Then, with a heavy sigh, she glared up at the vice president with chagrin.

“Meaning, um, you’re saying you knew beforehand that there might be robbers?”

“No. I did not know it as fact. It was merely a deduction of which I was very nearly certain.”

“Then shouldn’t we have decided not to get on the train?!”

“What are you saying? By the time I made my deduction, I had already purchased nonrefundable tickets and had given the receipt to the president. Or are you suggesting I steal rides by creeping under the train, like Rachel?”

Carol was about to shout that this wasn’t the same thing, but once again, she was interrupted by a third party.

“...What...are you?”

“Eeep?!”

The abrupt question made Carol freeze up yet again.

The voice had a hard-boiled edge to it, and it had come from outside the door. Although the door was open, there was no one in sight. The speaker was probably standing with his back against the corridor wall, but the girl couldn’t bring herself to stick her head out and check.

The owner of the voice didn’t seem concerned about the three unconscious robbers. Instead, he was glaring at the vice president with cold malice.

However, the vice president only took a sip from the cup of black tea on the table. Then, as if that had moistened his throat, he spoke smoothly to the individual in the corridor.

“...Hmm? You are inquiring about my identity? If my name alone will suffice, I need merely introduce myself as Gustav St. Germain. Ah, and St. Germain is not my real name. It is a sobriquet I borrowed from the count of St. Germain, that famed time-traveling alchemist and information merchant without parallel in all of history. Yet, that is apparently not what you are asking about... In other words, esteemed customer, are you inquiring about my profession? In that case, allow me to introduce myself as the vice president of the *Daily Days* newspaper company, whose headquarters are located in New York. In terms of gossip articles alone, we pride ourselves on being one of the leading purveyors in that city, so I would be honored if you would consider becoming a regular subscriber, should the opportunity arise. Additionally, as a side business, I deal in information.”

A courteous stream of words.

A compressed mass of information.

His reply was nothing like the way he’d spoken to the girl. He spoke in a way that suited those sharp eyes of his, like a schemer with his sights set on a mark.

It had been a long monologue, but his speech was so fluent that

neither Carol nor the figure in the corridor felt like interrupting him.

Regardless, even after the vice president stopped speaking, the malice outside the door didn't waver.

"Strange... Let me tell you a strange story."

"By all means."

"We were gonna rob the fat cats on this train with zero warning to broadcast our big comeback to Chicago, see... But then this happened. How'd you find out about us? ...Or to put it like you did, how did you 'deduce our actions'? Did somebody squeal? If so, this will stop being a strange story and start being a sad one—but I believe in my guys, so that ain't even possible. It's a strange story, after all..."

His voice went cold.

The words were filled with such malice that even Carol, who wasn't dealing with him directly, feared for her life.

As she gripped her camera, on the verge of bursting into tears, the next thing she heard was the vice president laughing with perfect composure.

"Heh-heh... Heh-heh-heh-ha-ha-ha-ha. An excellent question... How did I come to possess the information I used to deduce your plan? Could I persuade you to accept that it is entirely because I am an information broker? Whether you believe it or not, it will not change the results, so you may take it any way you wish. After all, searching for meaning in results that have already occurred will not allow you to change the past."

Although his words seemed to respect the other man, Gustav St. Germain had a haughty attitude—claiming he held an absolute advantage.

"...Did you think I'd be satisfied with that? Because it might come in handy during my next robbery, that's why. However, now that I know that little girl is on this train, too, I'm not as comfortable knocking it over. I mean, in a depression like this one, I figured anyone riding first-class would be ducking taxes, but if there's a little girl on board, that's just awkward! Still, my irritation at the roundabout way you bloviate is a completely different kettle of fish, so let me suggest that you answer that question ASAP, for your own good. Okay?"

The young ringleader of the robbers spoke in an odd way.

When his malice seemed to have reached its peak, Gustav narrowed his already narrow eyes and addressed the man in the corridor.

"I believe I introduced myself as an information broker a moment ago. I am not a private individual. I am a merchant who sees everything, from stock trends to my own damnable memories, as pure data. That is what my profession is. That is the face I am wearing now

in this interaction with you.”

“...You’re telling me to buy? In a situation like this?”

“The negotiations are already under way, sir.”

There was power in his words. The three men lying in front of him were a barometer that showed that power. Regardless, the figure in the corridor didn’t seem at all flustered. The spite in his words merely softened a little.

“...I was gonna take apart all your joints, and the little girl’s joints, but I’ll refrain this time. For you.”

“Eeep!”

On realizing that she was also a target, Carol gave a little shriek. From what the man was saying, it seemed as though they might be spared, but she couldn’t just be happy about that.

“Oho... So you’re putting a price on humans. Is that what you’re saying, sir?”

“It’s like putting a price on information, yeah?”

At that ironic comment from the corridor, Gustav chuckled and took another sip of tea.

“Well, well. Understood. I’ll sell to you at that price... In that case, let me recount for you one of the incidents I know. This is a good opportunity, Carol, so you’d do well to listen, too.”

“Huh?”

Finding herself abruptly pulled into the conversation, Carol’s eyes searched the room as if she didn’t understand what was happening.

“If you dwell in this world, it will do you no harm to know about it: The tale of the man named Claire Stanfield—and of the mysterious persons around him... Although the central figure in this story isn’t the man himself but the young lady who is his life partner.”

“Claire...Stanfield...is a guy...?”

“Long ago, Claire was used as a masculine name as well, you see. His father seems to have been an old-fashioned individual...that aside.”

As he poured fresh tea into his own cup, the vice president prepared an additional serving with his right hand.

“I imagine it’s cold out there. Would you care to come in and join me for a cup of tea?”

Ignoring Carol’s tension, Gustav invited the man inside. He seemed hesitant about entering, but the vice president paid no heed to that. He poured tea into the new cup, then began to speak cheerfully of a certain incident.

It was almost as if he was enjoying being the one to tell the tale.

“Now, then... Where should I begin?”

“Let’s see... I’ll start with the story of that young woman. Her

name is—”

Interlude Tips—Huey and Chané

“I’ll raise this child myself.” Holding an infant wrapped in a cotton blanket, Huey Laforet spoke firmly to the woman in front of him. “After all, I sincerely doubt you’d be capable of raising a child. You’d only fall while carrying her, and that would end in disaster.”

The woman, apparently the infant’s mother, pouted and protested. After a brief argument, though, she gave in easily and skipped away, leaving her daughter behind.

“...This after she went through the pain of childbirth for this baby. She certainly backed down quite easily. I knew she lacked humanity, but to think that included her maternal instincts as well...”

Muttering these things, Huey spoke soothingly to the little girl he held.

“However, I am also lacking in humanity.”

Gazing down at the baby who was asleep in his arms, breathing peacefully, Huey murmured in self-mockery:

“You were never destined for a good upbringing.”

More than fifteen years passed...

And now, the voiceless girl boarded a train.

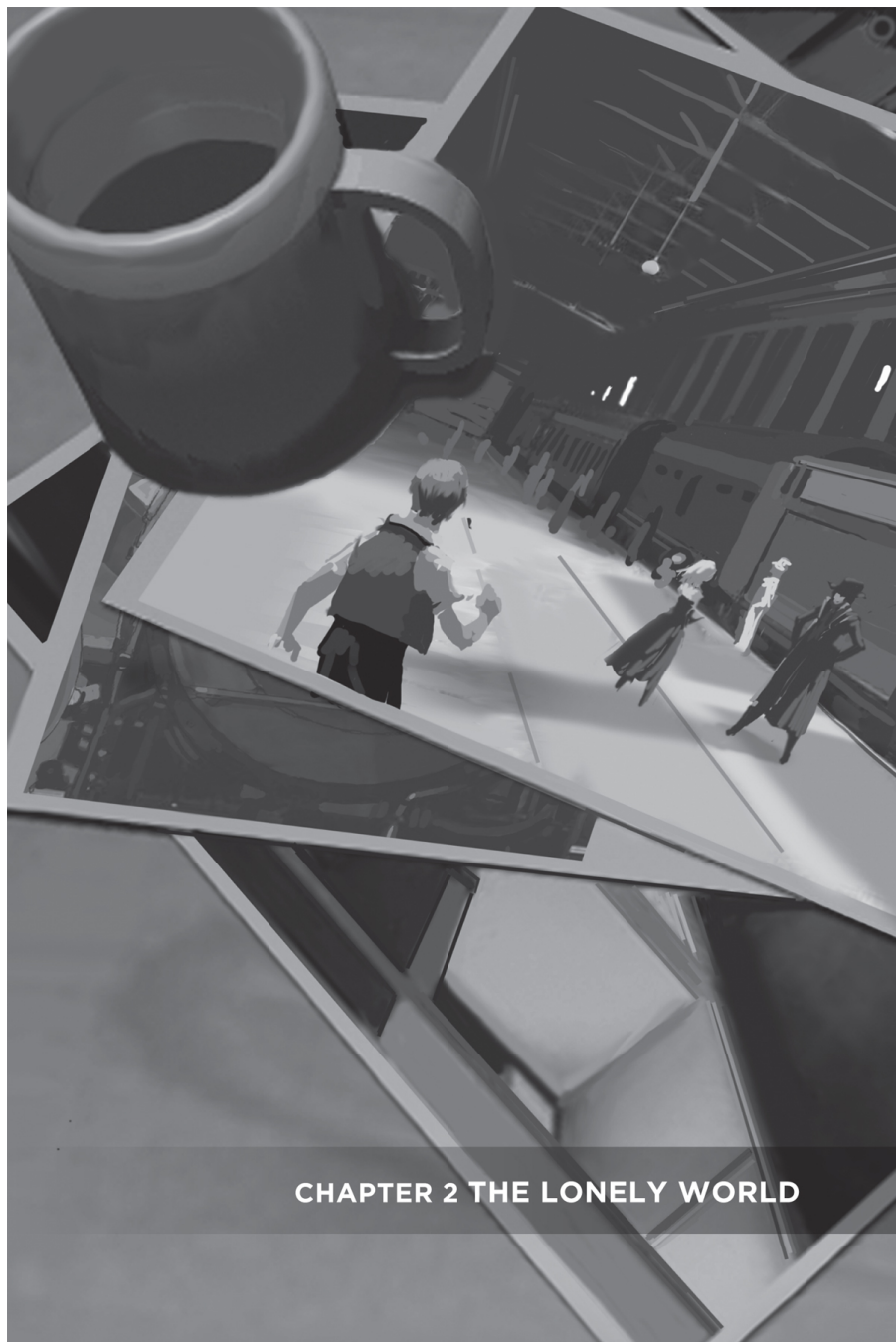
She would save her beloved father.

She would save the parent who was her entire reason for being.

No, she hadn’t been raised right.

She was aware of her own oddness, and yet she didn’t wonder about it.

On the Flying Pussyfoot, she met a man—a dreadful, strange, and somehow comical phantom who would uproot her world and turn it upside down.



CHAPTER 2 THE LONELY WORLD

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THE LONELY WORLD

I've heard that my mother was the one who named me Chané.

I've never even seen her face, but this name is the one connection we have, the only sense that I ever had a mother at all.

While I've never longed to meet her, this name is precious to me.

...Because it's the name my father calls me by.

It's the word that proves the connection between us.

I'm grateful.

I was happy just to have Father call my name. Receiving his attention made me so glad.

After all, for me, nothing besides Father ever existed.

That's still true.

There is nothing in my world besides Father. I don't need anyone else.

I was happy enough in that closed world.

And yet...that man easily broke a hole in my shell and climbed through.

Just like the figure in the nursery tales my father read to me when I was small.

Less like a prince on a white horse than a wicked magician who pulls off any feat, defying all common sense.

January 1932 New York

Prohibition.

Some claim it's the word that best symbolizes New York during this era.

Today, when people hear the word *Prohibition*, most of them don't think of the political role that particular law played or the faces of the politicians who instituted it; instead, they most likely visualize the specific images of mafia, crime—or Al Capone.

Something people wanted was banned to discourage corruption—

but as a result, what was born in place of that corruption was a more strictly organized criminal system.

Due to the Great Depression, which began in 1929, the economic situation steadily grew worse, while vast networks for illegal bootleg liquor were at work underground.

Speakeasies were everywhere, and so was the bloodshed over their profits.

At the same time, culture in America was beginning to truly flourish.

As the talkies flourished, numerous musical films were made, and they became a leading example of the entertainment provided directly to a population that had been compelled to go dry.

Another hugely popular genre, along with musicals, comprised films that depicted the underbelly of society, works like *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy*.

Among certain groups, the gangsters who provided them with liquor became heroes who took the place of an unreliable government.

In the underbelly of Depression society, the gold coins exchanged in the speakeasies shone brightest—

And the gangsters who should technically never have taken center stage in society were double-cast as enemies and heroes for the people.

Society's surface and underground connected in a Möbius strip surrounding the general public.

This was the era the young woman Chané Laforet lived in.

In New York, the light and shadow that came and went all across America mingled in a particularly complex way.

And on one of its streets, Chané Laforet was standing in the middle of a crowd. And she could do little more than that.

The street, lined with government buildings and offices, was teeming with crowds several times busier than usual.

Rumor had it this man Huey Laforet had planned a large-scale act of terror against the government and shaken up the whole world, and a fearless, inquisitive crowd had gathered to catch a glimpse of him as he was transported under guard.

He was also Chané's father, and she was lurking quietly in that crowd to save him.

As if to hide the painful-looking bandages on her left shoulder, she wore a thin coat over her black dress—with several knives concealed inside.

It was only a few days after the incident on the transcontinental express, the Flying Pussyfoot.

The Lemures had hijacked a train and demanded the release of their leader, Huey Laforet. She had been at the center of that plan, and she'd invested herself fully in it, prepared to throw her life away in order to rescue her father.

However, the murdering white suits and a variety of other elements had complicated the operation, and the plan had failed. She'd lost all her companions, too. Or to be more precise, it had become clear that they'd never been her companions in the first place.

She'd known that beforehand. Chané hadn't trusted them, either. After all, she had been planning to use them, too.

No amount of betrayals could upset her.

She didn't trust others to begin with, and she was well aware her father saw her only as a guinea pig. With regard to the former, no one placed their trust in her, either, so fair was fair. Regarding the latter, she didn't mind if it meant she could be useful to her father as his lab animal.

But all that aside, she'd believed that Goose and the others' "organization" would be power she could use in order to save her father. Now, she was the only one among the group in black from the train who she was certain hadn't been arrested or killed. There were rumors that a few members were still on the run, but she'd decided a rendezvous was out of the question.

I knew it. I'll just have to do this on my own.

She no longer had anything but herself to believe in, and yet not only did she not give up, she strengthened her resolve to retake her father by force.

The incident had delayed the suspect's transportation, but it was rescheduled in no time. A crowd had filled the street regardless; there was no telling where they'd heard the rumors.

Such whispers had reached her as well, naturally, and she'd raced to the spot as if this was her last chance.

She'd come here alone, prepared to strike down every police officer there.

The moment her father appeared, about to climb into the patrol wagon, she snatched a knife from her waist and prepared to launch herself into a run and cut down the policeman in front of her—

—but just then, her father's lips moved.

It was as if he knew she was watching him, and his expression was filled with a tranquil confidence.

He mouthed a brief message to her:

<Don't worry.>

She wasn't a perfect lip-reader, so she wasn't certain whether that had really been what he'd said.

The one thing she was sure of was that her father wasn't the slightest bit worried about what might happen to him.

And when she hesitated before beginning her dash, she lost her very last chance.

Had she made the right choice?

On the avenue where the crowd had begun to thin, the silent girl kept wondering. She knew the results wouldn't change no matter what answer she found, but still she kept asking: Had that really been the right move?

As she stood there anxiously, she heard rough breathing and incoming footsteps, and she turned around on reflex.

Of course both her hands held knives, and an unerring silver blade found the approaching individual's neck.

"W-waaaaaugh?! Ch-Chané, it's me! Calm down, okay?!"

"..."

When she saw the distinctive tattoo on the other person's face, Chané silently lowered her knives. For a moment, the surrounding bystanders had reacted with surprise as they wondered what was going on; however, seeming to decide it was best not to get involved, they found something else to look at and quickly walked away.

The boy's life had been in danger a moment ago, and his panting turned to panicked gasps, but although he looked like he was about to cry, he smiled at Chané.

"Ah, geez, that startled me... D-don't scare me like that."

"..."

Even after she'd slipped her knives back into her coat, Chané stared at the boy with eyes that would have left anyone frozen in terror.

He had a facial tattoo of a sword, and the description alone would call to mind a tough, dangerous type. But given the way he acted, he seemed more likely to be the victim of one.

His tear-filled eyes didn't hold an ounce of willpower, and they transformed that tattoo into ridiculous clown makeup.

Jacuzzi... Jacuzzi Splot.

As she gazed silently at the boy, Chané remembered his name.

He was a part of a group she'd been staying with for her time in New York.

She'd thrown herself off the train and into the river, and the boys who'd rescued her had been pulling some sort of cargo out of the water—a special freight from the same train she'd been on. The boys

had belonged a gang of train robbers, and the one in front of her was the boss.



He seemed unreliable for his position, though, and a small question rose in Chané's mind.

What is he doing here?

She hadn't told anyone where she was going.

But if he was here, did it mean he'd known she was coming to save her father?

Why?

What did he intend to do?

As confusion rose in Chané's heart, Jacuzzi relaxed a little and asked her a question.

"Are you okay? Oh, good... I just assumed you'd come out here to save that Huey person by yourself again...and...uh—dwaaaaaaah?!"

Jacuzzi's sentence turned into a scream.

The moment he'd brought up the word *Huey*, the blade Chané held had settled against his neck again.

"Why is the knife back?!"

Ignoring the question, Chané directed a piercing, combative glare at the young man.

What on earth was this boy plotting by getting involved with her father?

She wanted to grill him and get the full story, but she'd discarded her voice and had intentionally avoided learning sign language. As far as she was concerned, interrogating him using only her eyes and facial expressions was far too much of a hassle.

Should I give him a warning stab and run away?

Chané considered the idea for a moment, but she'd been lucky to find lodging with him, and discarding it seemed like a hassle as well, and she stopped herself just in time.

That said, she didn't put her knife away. Instead, she watched the boy for a while, but—

"W-wait, Chané, please calm down!" a young woman screamed, running up to them.

When she saw the blond-haired girl, Chané regained her composure.

The girl's face was badly scarred, and she wore both a black eye patch and glasses. She seemed to be about Jacuzzi's age. Most people would find her suspicious, but when she spoke, she sounded normal.

That's right... That woman knows what I really am.

When she'd encountered the white suit on top of the train, two figures had been crawling over the roof. One of them had been this girl with the eye patch.

When they'd met in Jacuzzi's hospital room a few days earlier, she'd fumbled the dish she was holding and given a smile of obvious

distress... And so it was fairly safe to assume that she knew who Chané was.

Performing the same analysis she'd made a few days ago, Chané observed the girl with expressionless eyes.

She'd been prepared to be reported to the police, but over the past few days, there had been no sign it would happen. If it had come to it, she was ready to take somebody hostage and make a run for it, but all her mental planning was for nothing.

...What is she thinking?

Jacuzzi was the heart of this delinquent group.

At this point, these two were the only delinquents Chané could see, but she knew there were between thirty and forty of them in all.

While they weren't on the level of the mafia—they didn't even have guns—the ability to command numbers like that would be quite enough power.

Besides, although she'd only been observing them for a few days, she concluded that despite their apparent carelessness, they were a rather efficient organization.

Chané didn't know exactly what they'd done on the Flying Pussyfoot. At this point in time, she didn't know it was Jacuzzi who'd defeated Goose, the Lemures' leader, or that they'd been the ones who'd freed the hostages in the dining car.

Even so, she was *convinced* of the strength Jacuzzi's group had.

This group probably had enough clout to do whatever it wanted with a small society, and Chané had found the fact that they'd accepted an outsider like herself so easily incomprehensible...

But more than anything, the fact that they weren't interrogating her about her identity struck her as terribly unsettling.

They knew she was one of the terrorists in black, and yet they hadn't handed her over to the police, or blamed her, or even questioned her about it. That said, they also didn't seem to be sheltering her because they were afraid of reprisals.

The only ones who'd seemed openly scared of her when she'd first met them had been the girl with the eye patch, who said her name was Nice, and her companion Nick. Over these past few days, though, their fear had faded visibly.

Chané had lived among the paranoid Lemures until now, and she found the way this group dealt with her uncanny.

Are they also trying to use me...and Father?

It wasn't clear how much they knew about Huey Laforet, but if they knew everything and were hiding her anyway, she couldn't ignore the possibility that they might be trying to ingratiate themselves with her father through her.

If that happens, all I have to do is leave.

If they weren't trying to harm her father, there was no need to go out of her way to kill them.

If she simply removed herself from the situation, everything would work out.

Telling herself this, Chané slipped the knife back into her coat.

"Oh... G-good. Glad you understand." Jacuzzi heaved a big sigh and started to tear up.

Even so, Chané's question hadn't been resolved, and she kept her gaze fixed on the crying boy.

Nice had apparently picked up on Chané's question; she hastily spoke in place of Jacuzzi as his vision swam through his tears.

"Oh, no, it's... You know. Your name... It's Chané Laforet, isn't it? We thought the Huey in the newspapers might be a relative of yours... So we guessed we might find you here."

When she heard Nice's explanation, the tension in Chané's heart eased a little.

She actually had written down her name for the boys who'd pulled her out of the river. After everything she'd been through, she had given her real name in her confusion. Now that she thought about it, she wondered whether she should have given a false name.

Chané regretted that slightly, but she thought better of it almost immediately.

My name is my connection to Father. I mustn't lie about it.

Whether or not she knew about the restrictions her immortal father had regarding false names, Chané considered her own name extremely important. It was as if the name "Chané" was a contract that linked them.

The last name they shared, "Laforet," she must never discard, even temporarily. As Chané reaffirmed her convictions, Nice's expression softened a little.

"...You really were planning to save him, weren't you?" she said, already convinced.

Chané didn't deny it. She didn't acknowledge it, either, but Nice took her lack of response as an affirmation.

And what if I did?

Chané couldn't tell what the other girl was thinking, and she glared at Nice with mild irritation. On her unexpressive face, though, the anger didn't exactly show.

With a gentle smile that didn't suit her scarred face, Nice spoke to Chané, supporting Jacuzzi's shoulders. "Don't be reckless, please. If there's anything we can help you with, do tell us, anytime."

Jacuzzi smiled, too, wiping his tears away. "That's right. You need to be careful about this stuff," he said, starting to hobble away on a pair of crutches. Both his legs were still healing from gunshot wounds.

When Nice saw that, she scolded him lightly.

“That goes for you, too, Jacuzzi! You don’t even have permission to leave the hospital yet!”

“Oh, you know, you’re right... Oh no! I thought about it, and now the pain’s coming back. Waaaaaaugh?! The bandages! Blood! I’m bleeding...! I-it huuurts, I—I think I’m dying...!”

“That’s been there since yesterday. We’ll get your bandages changed right away, so let’s hurry and go back to Mr. Fred’s place, all right?”

The two of them were about to lose her, but Chané wasn’t completely satisfied yet.

She also hadn’t heard why the boy had come here.

Jacuzzi’s injuries consisted of several bullet wounds and burns.

Although she didn’t know about Goose and Jacuzzi’s fight to the death, Chané was certain that those wounds had been inflicted by her one-time companions, the Lemures. They’d betrayed her and shot her in the left shoulder as well, and Jacuzzi had probably been dragged into the incident. She’d heard he’d stolen cargo from a freight room, so he could have run into them then.

Chané had drawn her own conclusions, but it didn’t change the fact that this boy was severely injured.

She’d heard that his bones and internal organs had been miraculously spared, but he probably should have been confined to bed right now.

...And yet, he’d gone to the trouble of coming out here. Why?

Was he trying to stop her because, if she broke the law, she’d endanger their position as well?

If so, he was acting in rational self-defense. She had no intention of letting herself be stopped, but she could understand his reasons for trying.

As those thoughts ran through Chané’s mind, she gazed at the tattooed boy.

“...”

“Uh... Oh, right. You wanted to know why I’m here... I, um, it’s not because I want to get in your way or anything.”

Finding himself the target of her dubious gaze, Jacuzzi gave a rather uncomfortable smile.

“Erm... I mean, doing this stuff by yourself is dangerous, so...”

“...?”

“Well, you know... If you were going to rescue Huey, I thought it might be better if we helped...”

That wasn’t quite the answer she’d been expecting.

Help?

After pondering the meaning of that word for a while, Chané’s

expression changed.

...That is to say, her eyebrows drew together slightly.

Why?

If they were trying to use her father through her, an attempt to put her in their debt would have made sense. And yet instead of bringing all his companions along, he had come by himself. It was a nearly suicidal move, and Nice's presence wasn't enough to change that. She looked around, wondering whether he had brought friends after all, but she didn't see anyone in particular.

Chané questioned the boy's sanity, ignoring her own plan to take on the police force all by herself. If he'd been like the red conductor she'd met on that train, or an immortal like her father, she would have understood. This boy, though, seemed weak enough that a grade-school kid from the slums could beat him to death. Nothing she'd seen from him had suggested he had any special power.

As multiple question marks began to surface in her mind, Jacuzzi looked up at her, a little enviously.

"Still...you're incredible, Chané."

"?"

The abrupt remark only added to her questions.

"You were planning to pick a fight with the police for somebody else's sake, even if you had to do it all by yourself."

He said it as an offhand comment, but it held a weighty significance for Chané.

By myself.

"All by yourself."

The phrase Jacuzzi had used had been accurate.

No. You say it as if my solitude is optional.

I am all by myself. I have no other choice.

The suggestion that I won't do it "if" I'm all alone...isn't part of my reality. The idea of doing something "even if" I'm all by myself hadn't ever occurred to me.

There is no one in this world except me and Father. I have no complaints about that.

Now that they've taken Father away, I'm alone.

I don't have "companions."

I don't have family, either.

My only connection to my mother is the name she gave me; other than that, she's a total stranger.

I don't mind my solitude. I'm happy enough this way.

It was true of the Lemures, and it's true of this town: Both are temporary places for me to stay.

That's how it's always been and always will be—

“If that’s the standard you’re using, then you’re tough, too, Jacuzzi. Making enemies of the Chicago mafia—anyone would say you’re out of your mind.”

“I-is that supposed to be a compliment?! I mean, I...I was only able to do that because of everyone else. L-like you, Nice...”

While Chané was busy reinforcing her worldview, Jacuzzi and Nice’s conversation was devolving into an exchange of sappy compliments.

“Ah-ha-ha. Thanks, Jacuzzi... Still, fighting the police—fighting the state—is rebellious even for you, don’t you think?”

“B-b-but, now that I think about it, all policemen have guns, don’t they? A-aww no, I just remembered how much it hurt when I got shot, and hon—honest—h-h-h-h—honestly, I—I-I-I-I... I’m scared, for real. Wh-wh-wh...when I think about that, I really am glad you changed your mind. Th-th-thanks, Chané. Ha-ha...ha-ha-ha...”

As Jacuzzi laughed, his voice was shaking, and his knees were quaking.

As she looked at the boy, who seemed liable to burst into tears again, Chané thought:

Apparently he really wasn't thinking about protecting himself at all.

Is he saying he forgot about the danger to himself in order to help me?

I don't understand.

He's nothing like anyone I've ever met before.

When I was with the Lemures, every day was one lie after another. They broadcast information I didn't need, and I learned how to see through the lies others told.

However, I can't sense any lies in what he says.

Why...?

There in the street, Chané puzzled over the boy’s character.

Around her, the usual hustle and bustle was beginning to return, but to her, the world still seemed dark and cold. Now that her father was gone, she could feel no warmth—

And so standing there, stunned, was all she could do.

Afternoon of that same day Fred's hospital

I am one of the terrorists who attacked that train.

After Jacuzzi got back to the hospital, a sheet of notebook paper was thrust at him.

"...Huh?"

The one holding it out to him was the mysterious, voiceless girl who'd become his companion only a few days before.

She didn't seem to know sign language, and he understood that she communicated only what truly needed to be said by writing it down—but this was the first time she'd said anything of her own accord.

And ultimately, Jacuzzi had absolutely no idea what she meant.

"Uh, well... I know that, but..."

Lying in his bed at the hospital, Jacuzzi looked back and forth between the note and Chané's face.

The night his friends had brought her here, Nice and Nick had given him a very thorough briefing about her. Nick had been adamant that she was dangerous and they needed to run her out, but the ones who'd brought her from the river had objected mightily, and in the end, they'd decided to keep an eye on the situation.

"Wh-what about it?"

Had she realized he was an enemy of the black suits on the train, and chosen to take her revenge now? If so, here in bed, he was practically a slab of beef on the chopping block. The doctor wasn't around, Nice had stepped out, and the only patients in the next room—an old guy who smelled like booze, a young dope addict-type with dark circles under his eyes, and a tall guy with badly injured legs—were far from healthy and couldn't be called upon for help.

As those thoughts ran through Jacuzzi's frightened mind, Chané held out a second note, which she seemed to have written in advance.

Why haven't you reported me?

"Th-that's not really something I can, uh..."

Jacuzzi was relieved to find that she wasn't going to attack him, at least not right now, but he still wasn't able to answer her question immediately.

As he considered how to respond, Chané held out yet another piece of paper.

Why have you accepted me when I was one of them?

"There's more?!"

Accepting the pieces of paper she was handing him one after

another, Jacuzzi read through them, flustered. Paying no heed, Chané forced yet another piece of notebook paper onto him.

“Y-you’ve been thinking about this, haven’t you?!”

What was your objective in trying to help me save my father even if it put you in danger?

The notes were written in a careful hand, and he couldn’t sense anything of the girl’s knifelike aura in them. That did not change the intensity in her gaze as she stood next to him in reality, and confusion over the discrepancy made Jacuzzi start to tear up.

“Wh-why...? Um... When you say all that to me at once... I mean, write it all at once, I...”

Even as he fought back tears, Jacuzzi sat up and thought for a little while. When he spoke, it was with an awkward smile that seemed to say even he didn’t really understand.

“Well, I won’t say we were wrong for stopping the black suits, but...we stole cargo from it ourselves, so we can’t complain too much. Besides...I know it may be a strange thing to say, but maybe it’s because you aren’t like the others.”

“...?”

“You were trying to rescue your family, weren’t you? I think I know how you feel... Plus, I gotta spend some time with you before I can know whether or not you’re a good person.”

When she heard that, Chané picked up a pen from the bedside table and wrote on the notebook paper that sat beside it.

So...did you say you’d help me because you’d decided I was a “good person”?

“Um, I’m not smart enough to figure that out in just a few days... I’m sorry. We could spend the rest of our lives around each other, and I still may not know. But we’ll still be friends the whole time, so does it really matter?”

Jacuzzi gave a troubled smile. As Chané watched him, her eyes still seemed mystified, and she shoved the memo from a moment before at him again.

What was your objective in risking your safety to help me save my father?

“Erm... That’s a good question. I wasn’t thinking about it very hard, so I don’t know. Sorry.”

Jacuzzi had spoken honestly, and even though he felt a little tense, he went on.

“The thing is, we don’t know the city well enough to hide you from the police or anything yet... I thought we’d probably be okay as long as we didn’t tangle with the mafia, but it sounds like we’re not the only delinquent group around here these days.”

As he went on, sounding less than confident, Jacuzzi began to

worry about himself, and his face grew gloomier and gloomier.

“Ugh, what do I do? People were saying the leader of this gang is really dangerous and he carries around some kinda tool all covered in blood. What happens if he comes after us? What if everyone gets hurt because I led us here...? Or worse? Actually, I bet I’d be the first to die. What do I do? Aaaaah...”

Jacuzzi, who’d started to tear up as he thought about what might happen, abruptly raised his head—

—but Chané was nowhere to be seen, and the door to the hospital room was creaking shut.

Only the sheets of notebook paper on his bedspread told him that what had happened hadn’t been a dream.

Still, even after the girl vanished, Jacuzzi kept sobbing, thinking pessimistically about his and his friends’ futures.

“Aaaah... Wait, I don’t have the money to pay for the hospital! Everyone was happy about how much they’d gotten for the explosives we stole from the train; I wonder if they set aside my share. Ngh, what’ll I do if the junkie in the next room over starts to rampage...? What if the black suit I knocked off the train is alive and comes back with the flamethrower? Are we gonna be okay in a new city...? I wonder what everybody’s thinking... Nnngh.”

The tearful voice of the hero who’d saved the train echoed in the hospital room, unheard by anyone else.

It was almost as if he was tormenting himself for his own weakness.



Does this mean they tried to save me without any selfish motives whatsoever?

No, that can’t be.

It’s probably a way to curry favor with my father through me.

Chané, who’d come face-to-face with a person she couldn’t understand, decided to think that way even if her instincts disagreed.

*But...I can’t see any lies. That boy’s eyes were perfectly honest.
He’s the same.*

The individual that surfaced in the girl’s mind was the magician she’d encountered on top of the train.

He's like that man—the red phantom who appeared out of nowhere when I tried to kill that man in white on the roof.

He was wearing a conductor's uniform soaked in his victims' blood, and I couldn't sense any lies in the words he said to me, either.

That letter I carved into the train's roof... If he read that, he's sure to look for me...and he'll find me.

When he does, I'll...

I'll kill him. That redheaded conductor I met on top of the train has to die.

For Father's sake.

Otherwise, I might start to live for someone other than him.

Interlude Tips—Childhood Pal

“For the love of— Don’t forget you’re injured, all right?”

As I spoke, I changed the bandages on a patient named...Jacuzzi, I think.

What with this, that, and the other, I’d managed to get off that train safely.

This doctor, Fred, had just happened to be on the scene, and I’d taken the plunge and asked to act as his assistant. He’d agreed readily. I didn’t think saying I’d been suckered in when I happened to run into my childhood buddy Ladd would work, especially when I was wearing the same white clothes, but apparently, the fact that I’d bought my ticket separately from Ladd and the other guys had paid off. Plus, the doc had more clout with the cops than I’d figured.

I didn’t have anywhere to go, so I started working at this hospital as the doctor’s assistant for real, partly in order to throw the cops off the trail.

Still, all the patients here were weird.

There was a young guy who looked like a junkie and an old guy who stunk like booze. The last guy was hurt real bad and had dozens of guns strapped all over his body, too. Sheesh, was this place a loony bin or a hospital?

That said, the most uncomfortable part for me was taking care of the *scrawny, wimpy* tattooed kid.

After all, he knew I was one of Ladd’s pals.

We were on the train together... Although actually, it sounds like the kid was an enemy of Ladd’s. From what I hear, the Russo Family has him in their sights. A snot-nosed brat like this—who’d have thought?

I had zero plans to contact the Russos, though.

Ladd was the only connection I had with that family, for one thing, and if I did anything dumb, the big one or the girl with the eye patch and gunpowder would make sure I never did anything again.

And so as the doc’s assistant, I got handed grunt work like changing this guy’s bandages and getting his food ready... And if that sounds awkward to you, you’d be right.

At first we didn’t even talk, but after several days, his body finally loosened up—and the kid snuck out of the hospital and came back

ready to faint. I got fed up and finally grouched at him.

The kid flinched, then hung his head, drooping like a baby bunny.

"I-I'm sorry. It's just, I couldn't just sit here..."

"It's fine that you care about your buddies, but you're not exactly a big tough guy, so if you don't put yourself first, you'll wind up taking a dirt nap. With those wounds, you're lucky to be alive at all."

The kid's name was Jacuzzi Splot.

From what Ladd said, he was the leader of a group of delinquents that killed quite a few Russo Family men, but...if you ignored that ink on his face, he was a gofer underling at best.

As I turned to him suspiciously, Jacuzzi asked me a timid question.

"Mister, um... You were with those guys in the white suits, weren't you?"

His eyes were guarded—frightened, really.

C'mon, if you're scared of me, there's just no hope for you.

"Yeah, that's right. I've known that nutcase Ladd since we were kids."

"Why haven't you reported me? To the Russo Family, I mean."

That question was way too much, and I gave a wry smile in spite of myself.

"Wh-what?" Jacuzzi cocked his head, looking stumped. I glanced at the papers on the table, then let him have it.

"Kid, were you writing out *Why haven't you reported me?* as practice for asking me that?"

"Huh? W-wait, what?! N-no! That's the note Chané wrote..."

"I know that. Chané's the doll in the black dress who left recently, ain't she? Your voice was the only one I heard, so she must've been writing down her half of the conversation."

I was only messing with him a little, but Jacuzzi's face went bright red, and he started tearing up. *What's with this guy?*

"Y-you were listening?!"

"Relax. I didn't pay any attention to the whining you did after she left."

"Yeep! I-I'm sorry!"

"...What are you apologizing for?"

Seriously, I don't get this fella.

What's a guy like him doing in charge of a group of delinquents?

I doubt he's a scapegoat for them to use if the cops come after 'em, and they don't look like the sort of group that would try to have a puppet in charge.

After making sure I'd changed all his bandages, I leaned against the wall by the window and answered that earlier question.

"Well, Ladd and I go way back, but I'm not with the mafia. If I

palled around with those types, I'd be dead multiple times over."

"That Ladd person seems more dangerous to me..."

"I can't argue with that... Well, he ain't the type to kill his pals, and that's the one thing you can believe out of him. Aside from that, he's hopeless... Next to him, you're practically one of the good guys. If I handed somebody like you over to the mafia, I wouldn't be able to sleep at night, no matter what kind of sky-high bounty they've got on you."

"B-bounty...?"

He must've remembered the position he was in. I watched his face turn pale.

Seriously, I was impressed that a guy like this picked a fight with the Russo Family.

I was about to leave the room, but Jacuzzi spoke up from behind me.

"U-um... Uh, thank you."

"Changing bandages is my job, so no need to thank me for that."

"N-no, I meant for not reporting me... Erm, frankly, I don't understand why a person like you is friends with someone so terrifying."

...Was he just asking because he's curious?

Or was he hinting that I should cut ties with Ladd because he was worried about me?

Damn. I would have liked to say it was none of his beeswax, but he was actually 100 percent right.

"...I know I shouldn't be. Trust me."

"Oh, n-no, sorry, I'm sorry! That wasn't what I..."

"I'm sure you've got your past. So do I, and so does he."

Man, now that we're here, I might as well.

It wouldn't hurt to tell this guy just a little about him.

"You don't have to be that jumpy... Probably. Ladd's not gonna kill you."

"Huh?"

"The folks he kills are the laid-back ones who think they're untouchable, who live without any sense of danger. I dunno about your happy-go-lucky pals, but you're always scared about when you or your friends are gonna die...and the doc told me you wouldn't have gotten those wounds unless you knew you might bite the big one."

Seriously, when they first carried him into that compartment, I thought Ladd had worked him over. He was burned, he'd been knifed in the arm, he had holes in his gut and legs, and it seemed like a genuine miracle that he's gabbing away this energetically now.

"Anyway, Ladd doesn't kill guys like you. Even if he's a murdering maniac."

“He’s a m-murderer?!”

Oh cripes, did he not know about that?

“...Well, I doubt there’s any proof lying around, but that guy must’ve killed a ton of people before he ever stepped foot on that train. I bet the whole reason he was there in the first place was to kill the passengers and other folks in New York. Doesn’t matter who... Nah, I guess it does matter who to him. And so, uh, that pal of yours, Jack— He was lucky, too. That guy coulda beaten him to death, easy.”

“No! Wh-why? How can he do things like that?!” Jacuzzi shouted, a trace of cowardice leaving his face.

He probably figured he couldn’t forgive Ladd for his inhuman acts.

Well, of course not. That was the normal reaction.

This guy was right.

The ones who were wrong were Ladd and fence-sitting sad sacks like me.

“...I dunno. I couldn’t tell you what the inside of that guy’s mind is like. It’s not as if anything made him a murderer. The next thing he knew, he just was one. We’ve been playing together since we were kids... And before we knew it, he’d turned into the guy you know. I couldn’t do anything about him; that’s all it is. I’m just a coward who doesn’t even try to stop him.”

“...Then why are you with him? If you aren’t going to try and stop him, you wouldn’t have to be around him, and yet... You don’t look like the sort of person who’d join in and have a good time.”

The guy stared at me steadily. This clearly didn’t sit right in his stomach.

I wanted to look away, but then I would’ve felt guilty, too. I can’t stand those eyes, dammit.

I shut the door to the room and, sighing, lowered myself into a chair in the corner.

Then I decided to tell the tattooed kid, his eyes still on me, a little anecdote.

“...I dunno why he turned into a homicidal maniac, and there probably never was any actual cause...but *there used to be somebody who maybe could’ve stopped him.*”

“Her name was Leila. She was another childhood pal of ours— Ladd’s and mine.”



Leila was basically the leader of our group.

She was tougher than the guys, and she just had to have everything her way.

She was also good at looking after people, though. If somebody slugged me and left me crying, first Leila would slap the guy, and when he tried to fight back, Ladd would grab a brick and join the action. Ladd would plain try to belt the guy until he stopped moving, but she'd kick him to the ground and tell him she never asked for him to do that. And I mean, if she hadn't, the guy getting hit with the brick woulda died.

I watched those two from behind and wished I could be a part of that dynamic.

That was how it always went.

Leila was just about the only doll who could flat-out boss Ladd around. Can you even picture that? She had a pretty cute face, too, y'know.

Ladd's people were mafia, while Leila was from a rich congressman's family.

In a way, they might have made a good couple.

I figured watching them from the rear was the perfect place for me, the average guy.

But then our childhood ended, and right around the time we were starting to understand the sweet and sour of the world...something gradually started to go cockeyed.

Ladd started becoming increasingly violent at that time, but he hid that side of himself from Leila. At least, he thought he was hiding it. She knew, but she kept quiet.

Since I'd been watching both of them from behind, I knew about their feelings, but there was nothing I could do.

I vaguely thought that Leila might be able to pull Ladd back onto the straight and narrow. Even now, I'm sure that would have been true.



Except...I couldn't ever imagine the two of them getting hitched. They were friends; that was all. Not lovers.

They were childhood pals, and they mistook that friendship for love.

Yeah, it was a mistake. Before either of them knew about real romantic love, they assumed they did, and they went out of control.

I'd picked up on that.

After all, I'd just been watching them. Of course I'd seen it.

I just didn't say anything.

Even if it was a mistake, I figured it was best for the two of them to be together.

As long as I could still see them zipping around town, that was enough for me.

It was the wrong move, though.

With their mistaken beliefs still intact, Ladd and Leila finally eloped.

I mean, their families were like oil and water, and Leila's old man was a congressman who wanted to drive out the mafia. Eloping was the only choice they had—or the simplest one, anyway.

I watched them elope, too.

That was enough for me.

...Up until I heard that Leila had died after they got away.

I did technically hear what had happened, but I dunno whether it was true.

...I sure can't just tell you exactly what killed Leila.

What I will tell you, though, is that it wasn't Ladd.

Yeah, I don't know if what I heard is true or not, but on that point, I believe him.

If he had killed Leila, I think he'd be even more dangerous than he is now. Bad enough to kill even me or Vicky without blinking just because he was bored.

He's not like that, though.

In the end, I didn't have the courage to pry, and he didn't volunteer any information about Leila.

But I didn't need to ask to learn this one thing.

Or actually, I guess you'd say that something I already knew was branded into me more deeply.

Everyone dies.

We die so easy.

And now I know, really know, what that means.

I was a spectator. Leila and Ladd were actors on the stage.

To be honest, they were the actual protagonists of a story, so we lived in completely different worlds.

Because of that, I figured they'd live forever.

I never dreamed that somebody who could smack a tough guy like Ladd upside the head would die before I did.

.....

I wondered why I hadn't stepped on that stage with them.

If we'd all been in the same position, and I'd said something to them from there, fate might have changed.

Or maybe I'm just getting a swelled head, and I couldn't have done anything different.

Still, if I'd been on that stage...at the very least, I think I might've been able to say something to Ladd.

Even now, I regret it, but—

—I don't have the courage to stand where Ladd does, either.

That's probably why I'm still hanging around with him.

So I can watch how he ends, not from out in the audience or up on the stage, but from back in the wings.

...Although even I know that makes me the lowest scum out there.



“Ever since then, Ladd's had a certain policy about killing: He kills the soft ones who think they're untouchable. A conviction that means nothing to anybody in the world but him.”

.....

I'd gone on for a lot longer than I usually did.

Dammit, it's all this Jacuzzi kid's fault.

The guy can do what I couldn't do.

He's got the guts to put himself on the line for the sake of his pals.

“...”

Jacuzzi had listened to my story quietly.

He had a complicated expression on his face, but, well, that didn't matter.

After all, I'd only told him this stuff to protect myself.

“But his past doesn't change anything. Both of us are the lowest of the low—him and the guy who can't stop him. I wouldn't blame you for hating us, for cursing us and calling us names. If you want to hurt me, though, you'll have to forgive me for hightailing it outta here.”

“U-um.”

“I talked a little too much, though. Forget most of what I told you.”

I got up from my chair as if I was making a break for it, cut Jacuzzi off before he could say anything, and hotfooted it out of that hospital room.

And when I was alone, I thought:

What about me in the end?

Had I liked Leila?

I mean, of course I'd liked her, but was it as a friend, or a human, or a heroine on the stage? Or had it been love?

It's surprisingly hard to find out this stuff about yourself.

On the other hand, if Ladd searched, he might figure it out. Not that I've got the courage to ask him.

After Leila was gone, Ladd's urge to kill kept on growing.

And then he started attracting more birds of the same feather.

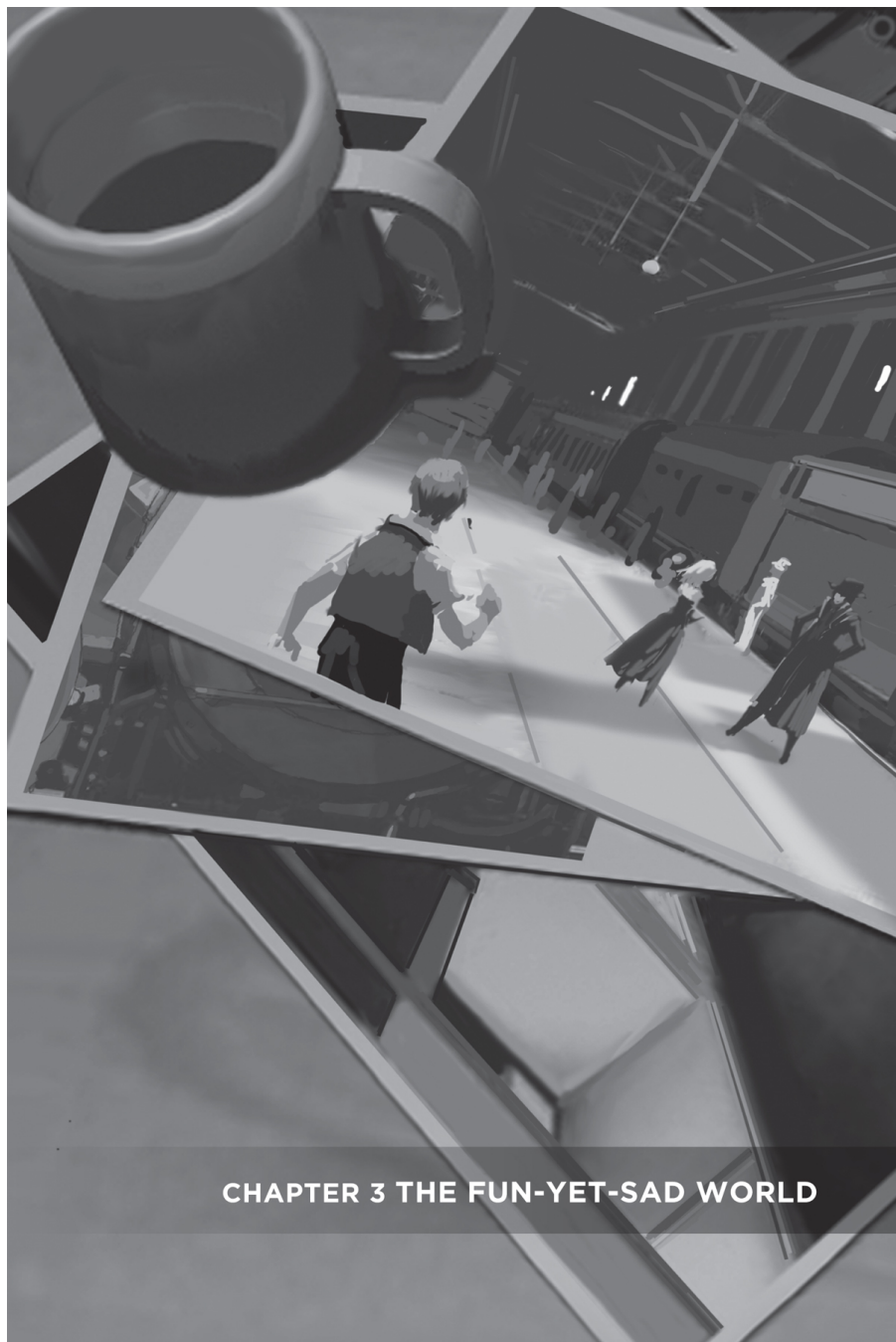
There was a doll with a death wish who was even weirder than he was...and a screwy wrecker from a car factory.

I think what Lua and Ladd have is actually love. That said, Lua's probably got no intention of putting the brakes on Ladd's rampages.

Come to think of it, what was the wrecker's name again? He had this huge wrench... Ahh, dammit; I know Ladd told me the day before we got on that train, but I can't remember it.

Anyway, he was bad news. He was always muttering to himself about how stuff was sad or fun.

I'm pretty sure I heard he's in New York now...



CHAPTER 3 THE FUN-YET-SAD WORLD

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THE FUN-YET-SAD WORLD

A few days later, a factory on a wharf somewhere in New York

“Ahhh... I’m so sad... Let me tell you some real, real sad stories.”

The abandoned factory by the Hudson River looked rather run-down.

Foot traffic in the area was sparse, and there was such a big difference between this neighborhood and the broad avenues that you never would have thought this was still in New York.

The factory, which had been shut down by the Depression, had lost all its former powerful dynamism. The building wasn’t able to go look for its next job, the way the unemployed did, and it might never serve its former purpose again until it rotted away.

In this era, business on society’s center stage had collapsed, and the power of the underworld had grown. Left behind by both these stages, the structure stayed dull and gray, its memory fading.

The plant was in a corner of that gray hulk.

The people who gathered there were also gray, individuals who didn’t belong to either society.

Ordinary citizens would never approach this building, and inside, members of the dark side of society were meeting together.

“These stories make anyone sad. If you want to cry ahead of time, now’s your chance.”

The man was using an oil drum as a chair, and in the dim factory, his silhouette was rather peculiar.

He was probably around twenty years old. If all you looked at were his blue coveralls, you might think he was a former factory hand.

Such a bright blue could never have been used on ordinary work clothes, though, and if he’d walked around town dressed like that, he’d be as conspicuous as you could get.

The truly odd thing wasn’t that color, but the object the man was fiddling with.

It was an adjustable wrench, the sort used to tighten nuts.

By itself, the name would suggest it was a normal thing for a workman to have—but there were two abnormal things about it.

One was its size.

The man didn't have a large build, and the silver baton-shaped object he held in his hands was clearly longer than a child's arm. It felt more accurate to call it a mace from medieval warfare rather than a tool.

The other thing was...

The fact that the surface of the once-gleaming silver wrench was dull with caked red blood.

At first glance, the man seemed slender and mild-mannered. His muscles were unexpectedly solid, but shiny blond hair hung over his face, and the half-open, sleepy eyes behind it were striking.

If all you saw was his lustrous hair and his pale skin, you might have been able to call him a handsome young man, but the color in his eyes was both incredibly dull and terribly upsetting to people who saw them.

As he toyed with that enormous, misshapen wrench, spinning it between his hands, he spoke quietly to the mixed crowd in front of him.

"They say humans grow during sad times and sing life's praises while they're lazily enjoying the fun times. I don't plan to grow any more than this, though."

The wrench the man had been spinning stopped dead, and he slipped down from the oil drum in an agile move.

"So why do I have to tell such sad stories, huh? What are you trying to pull, making me grow more than I already have? Where are you planning to take me? This, when what I actually want is to sing life's praises and let laziness corrupt my soul!"

Venting his irritation in odd phrases, the man fiddled with his wrench with both hands.

"The first sad story is that Toady cheated at a casino and got sent to the hospital with all his digits broken."

Shaking his head, his face expressionless, the man lobbed the wrench straight up into the air.

The tool fell, spinning fast. It probably weighed about ten pounds or so, but the man caught it easily with a pleasant *smack*.

"The kid in charge, Firo or whatever his name was—he looks innocent enough, but damn, can he be nasty. I would've felt better if he'd plain killed him... But wait: If Toady died, I'd be so sad I'd stop feeling better. What a contradiction! Yeah, that's way too damn sad!"

Tossing and catching, tossing and catching, juggling a wrench that would cause him serious injury if it hit him in the head, the man went on.

"The next sad story is that an ashtray came falling out of a hotel window and stuck right into my car... And it was a brand new Ford,

fellas. And lemme tell ya, those things are sturdy; by some miracle, I was able to keep driving. Still sad, though.”

Smack, smack.

The intervals between wrench throws were gradually shrinking.

At the same time, the wrench was spinning faster.

“I was thinking of raiding that hotel, but it sounds like the Runorata Family backs that place. Don’t wanna make enemies of a huge mafia outfit.”

Smack, smack.

“And one more thing.”

Smack, smack, smack-smack.

“Mr. Smith tangled with a Gandor exec and ended up in the hospital with a busted mug... Dammit, he promised he’d gimme a few of those dozens of guns he had stowed in his coat, but ain’t no way that’s happening now.”

Smack-smack-smack-smack-smack-smack!

“And...the saddest, saddest, saddest thing...is that *Ladd got hurt real bad and was hauled in by the cops!* What’s up with that?! Not only did the cops pick him up, it sounds like somebody dropped him off a train!”

The wrench reached peak velocity, and it looked as though a translucent disc was dancing through the air.

“Are you?!”

Smack!

“Telling me!”

Smack!

“Someone who!”

Smack!

“Could hurt Ladd!”

Smack!

Smack!

Smack!

“Actually exists!”

Smack!

“On this planet?!”

Smack!

Smack!

Smack-smack-smack-smack!

Wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff.

Wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff.

Wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff.

*Wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-
wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff-wff*

When the wrench's rotation had stabilized at top speed, the man stopped throwing it into the air and, without killing its rotation, kept spinning it between his hands like a baton.

[illegible]

The instant the man's scream reached its peak—

—a roar like a lightning strike echoed, and the oil drum he'd been sitting on a moment ago soared through the air, though it was no longer drum-shaped.

The people around him flinched and then gradually realized what had happened. It was very simple: He'd struck the oil drum with the wrench, and he'd struck it hard. That was all it was.

Even empty, that oil drum still weighed at least fifty pounds—and it soared as lightly as if it was made of crumpled paper. If he turned that wrench on them, they definitely wouldn't survive.

Shivering, the handful of people in the factory fearfully looked at the creator of that destruction—the man who was the center of their group, Graham Specter.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaAaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaAAA

Still gripping the wrench, Graham kept howling, but little by little, his tone of voice changed.

“AAAAAAH! AAaaaah! Ah— Ah, aaaaaah... ~~~~Aaah!

shone so brightly that you'd think he just won the lottery, and he swung the wrench around lightly.

"And now for a fun story! Let me tell you a fun story! If you want to laugh ahead of time, now's your chance!"

The way he spoke had barely changed at all, but the direction of his tension had flipped 180 degrees.

"Life is fun! Try saying that ten thousand times a day! Your head will go all screwy, and all the pain will disappear! Okay, okay, okay, okay. I've triumphed over sadness and have simply evolved to a higher stage! Power's good. Really good! Don't you think so, fellas?"

He was saying something completely different from what he'd said a moment ago, but the people around him could only nod in unison.

Graham Specter: Chicago native and former auto factory worker.

In Chicago, he'd been a Russo Family flunky, but when the factory had failed, he'd moved to New York.

He idolized Ladd Russo like a big brother, and he took more pleasure in the act of destruction than anything else.

That said, what perplexed the people around him more than that tendency was that his emotions shifted in extraordinarily intense ways, and they were prone to extreme spikes and dips, always at either zero or a hundred.

It wasn't clear whether he was doing it on purpose or unconsciously, but either way, it was all the people around him could do to keep shifting emotional gears.

In terms of New Yorkers with intense mood swings, Elean was notorious for them at the information brokerage. But Graham wasn't manic-depressive. He was always manic, and *the capricious shifts in his emotions only affected the direction*.

In a nutshell, that was the young man who had appeared in town just about the time Dallas Genoard had vanished, and who now ran the local gang of hooligans.

"Wonderful! Man, is life fantastic! Well, I was going to tell a fun story, but I can't think of anything in particular! I'm all worked up now! My okay brain is so okayed that it's okayified, fellas, so tell some kind of fun story! If you don't, I'll break one joint apiece, got it?!"

Revealing his true tyrannical nature, Graham twisted his wrench to the side.

Imagining their own elbows getting trapped by that wrench, twisted, and broken, the surrounding figures shuddered.

They couldn't let the silence go on and have him actually start breaking things, but they also couldn't let him backslide into gloom. Coming to that decision, one of the figures timidly ventured, "M-Mr. Graham... Um, uh, I dunno if it's a fun story, but do you know about the new group that got into town recently?"

“Nah, I dunno ‘em... Whoa, it’s a story I don’t know! I got kinda psyched up there! How do I brake my racing heart?! Break? Say, breaking stuff’s the only way, right? Right?! What’ll I do?! C’mon, tell me what I should do!”

As he spoke, Graham turned his wrench on a piece of abandoned factory equipment and started messing around with it.

They figured he was going to use brute force and hurl the thing, but instead, he efficiently dismantled the machine’s joints with the wrench, occasionally taking a small screwdriver or pair of clippers out of his coveralls and working with both hands at once.

“W-well...they seem like a group of hooligans, like us... And it looks a whole lot like they’re based out of Millionaires’ Row.”

“Millionaires’ Row? The rich folks’ street?”

“Yessir.”

Millionaires’ Row was an avenue lined with mansions, the second residences of the nation’s wealthiest individuals. Even for New York, the district had a particularly elegant atmosphere, and it was both physically and emotionally distant from the area in which they lived.

“Nice. I love stories with plenty of dough in ‘em! So how come a gang of fellas like us is hanging around there? Are they knocking it over? Yeah, it’s gotta be robbery! Damn... Before they get the scoop on us, we should dismantle a house ourselves and take the safe out, bring it safe here, and slowly break it down, and break it down, and break it down some more... Aaaaaah, I’m all psyched up now! I’m absolutely, hopelessly, transcendently worked up!”

Although his hands were still moving precisely as they dismantled the machine, the rest of Graham kept wriggling in a strange semblance of a dance. Relieved more that his destructive impulses were focused entirely on the machine than by the fact that his mood had improved, his delinquent henchman went on with his story.

“No... The thing is, seems they’re tight with the head of the Genoard Family, and they’re hanging out at one of their second homes.”

“Genoard? Ah! I know them! That’s the one where the family head and his oldest son went into a dam or a river or something last year and drowned, right?”

“Yeah, when I said *head of the family*, I meant the heir, a girl named Eve. The second son, Dallas, is missing too, so everything went to the oldest daughter.”

“I see! In other words, those new fellas in town somehow managed to get in tight with poor little Eve, or maybe threaten her! That’s incredible! They must be geniuses, huh? Sorry, I don’t really get it, but I just wanted to use the word *geniuses* right now!”

As if he’d been dragged into Graham’s hyperactive, nonsensical

mood, the delinquent grew more animated as well.

“So see! If we slyly take ‘em in, then take ‘em over, we’ll get to milk that, too— *Blugh?!’*”

The end of his sentence turned into a groan, and the delinquent crumpled forward, knees quaking.

The tip of the giant adjustable wrench had dug into his stomach, and the blow seemed to have compressed his organs and run right through to his spinal cord.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, no, no, no. What’s with that plan? You aren’t even hiding that you’re a leech; it kinda got me excited! But no! Hell no! What’s the point of being so timid? I mean, you can’t bust up anything that way. Maybe you could bust up their friendship, but the stuff I want to bust up is physical, get me? If you get me, gimme an answer!”

Graham beamed, letting his wrench dangle.

Due to the shock of that jab to the gut, the delinquent couldn’t speak well.

“...What about that answer?” Graham’s eyes were smiling, but his voice sure wasn’t.

The guy knew he had to answer, but his lungs weren’t working properly, to say nothing of his vocal cords.

Through his despair and anxiety he desperately tried to calm his mind and lungs. Still, his galloping heart and the dull pain from his stomach allowed him no relief.

As if he was trying to frighten him further, Graham raised that enormous adjustable wrench high in the air. To the delinquent, it seemed to be as clear a symbol of death as the blade of a guillotine.

“No answer. Then you can just be...dead meat!”

“Yeaaaaaaaaaagh—!”

The sound that tore from his throat was a wordless scream, and a dull noise echoed in the room.

“Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I was obviously kidding! Why’d you—? You didn’t need to pass out like that! Man, I feel super-duper guilty! Oh shit, I’m all psyched up now! My stomach’s clenching up! It’s that mix of loneliness and happiness, that feeling you get the day before a trip! That feeling makes us even, yeah?”

Beside the shattered concrete lay an unconscious delinquent kid, his eyes rolled back in his head.

After he’d finished his self-centered apology, Graham took gears the size of baseballs out of the pocket of his coveralls and began to juggle with them.

“...So? Those new fellas have a leader, right? What’s that guy like?”

The question was a completely natural one, and another man who'd been standing beside him straightened up.

"Y-yeah! I just happened to get a look at him that time I went to Fred's hospital," he answered. "He was this weirdly nervous guy with a tattoo of a sword on his face!"

"He's inked, but he's nervous?! Damn. I don't really get it, but whoa, that guy's incredible! If we're careless, somebody might get killed... Who, you ask? Me! And you fellas! But who would do such a thing?"

"Who?!"

They knew that he tended to speak and act haphazardly when he was worked up, but even so, the delinquents felt compelled to speak up.

"A tattoo of a sword on his face, huh? He sounds like a guy worth breaking... Hmm?"

Ignoring the verbal jabs from around him as a matter of course, Graham abruptly stopped moving.

"...I'm pretty sure...somewhere around here..."

He headed over to a table in a corner of the factory, then began rummaging through the mess of paper and trash on top of it.

"Ah, found it. This is it, this right here."

Finding a sheet of paper in the pile, he carelessly shoved it at his delinquent friends.

"This wouldn't be him, would it?"

When he saw the portrait on that paper, one of his underlings gave an involuntary yell.

"Whoa! Th-that's the guy! That's him for sure!"

"Biiiiiingo! Whoo! Wahahoo! Nice! Nice! Nice!"

Beside Graham, who was delivering a series of weird whoops, the delinquents wondered why that portrait was even there—but when they saw what was written on the paper, it instantly made sense.

The paper held the signature of a Russo Family executive, one Graham had been friendly with—and text that said, to put it briefly, *Whoever finds this one will get a reward.*

If the police happened to spot the text, it would just look like they were searching for somebody. However, to anyone familiar with the Russo name, there was only one thing this paper could mean.

In other words—the guy had a bounty on his head.

"Let me tell you a happy, happy story. Let's savor this. Fun and happy are totally different things! Fun is transitory, but happiness remains in your memory forever, or that's what I figure! I'm saying so, right here and now! Heh-heh... Are you gonna laugh and say I've got a swelled head? Go right ahead! Give me a chuckle, and I'll demolish you!"

Saying something unreasonable, Graham turned back to the big piece of equipment and went on dismantling it, working even faster than he had earlier.

“All right, let me tell you a fun-yet-sad story. Fun is the flip side of sad... I guess? In other words, they’re heaven and hell. A milk train and a special express. Love and peace! Love! And! Peace!”

“Why’d you say that twice...?”

About half an hour later— Standing in front of the big machine, which had been broken down beyond all recognition, Graham wore the expression of a man who’d accomplished something.

As he used his wrench to hammer out components that had already been meticulously disassembled, he outlined a plan.

“For now, if we nab that Jacuzzi fella, we’ll get bread from Mr. Russo. It might even make a good tribute for my brother Ladd in the big house! Not that that’s anything to do with anything!”

Unaware of the fact that Ladd and Jacuzzi had actually met, Graham kept going, his excitement gradually building.

“Right... Speaking of love and peace, let’s talk about two birds and one stone.”

“What do those have to do with—? *Gwuff!*”

“So! First off, we’ll—yeah! We’ll kidnap Eve! Oh man... Just the idea of kidnapping an unmarried doll got me all worked up, but unfortunately, I like older women! I’m not interested in anybody my age or younger!”

“Huh? Then what about us— *Mgwah?!?*”

Lightly striking his companion in the gut with his adjustable wrench, Graham started outlining the plan.

“We’ll use her as a hostage to lure Jacuzzi over here, and then we’ll nab him, too! Then we’ll nab his bounty! Howzat? That’s a gem of a fun-yet-sad story, ain’t it?”

“What part of that is sad?”

Graham answered his henchman’s unnecessary question with utter confidence.

As if he was entertained.

As if he was really and truly enjoying himself—

And in the shadow of that expression, something about his smile vaguely resembled the murderous man in the white suit.

“It’s fun for us...and sad for them. Right?”

Inside A Couple the Night Before the Train's Arrival

December 1931
An older apartment building, somewhere in Little Italy

To Firo Prochainezo, a young gangster, the mood that night was a little different from usual.

The next day was December 31, the end of the year. That was part of it—but he would be greeting something else before the New Year.

During a certain incident a year ago, he'd made some friends.

They were a fairly odd couple by the name of Isaac and Miria.

From what he'd heard, they were on their way over from California, on the far western edge of the continent, on board the transcontinental express the Flying Pussyfoot.

"Sheesh. Digging for gold in California? I knew they were a couple'a loons way back when we first met, but why gold? Isn't the gold rush already over? And didn't they pan for the dust in the rivers?"

The baby-faced young man asking the questions was sitting in a spacious room.

The place was a rather drab one. It was large and neat, with an interior reminiscent of a decent hotel, but it seemed somehow lacking in character.

Although the apartment's layout was luxurious for a single occupant, Firo had been living here by himself for the past few years. When he'd lost his mother to tuberculosis, he'd been forced to leave their old apartment in Hell's Kitchen. He'd had to say good-bye to the neighbors, whom he'd been close to, and had been tossed out onto the streets of New York all on his own.

After that, he'd acquired a position in the Martillo Family, a gang, along with an income to match. The Martillos belonged to an organization called the Camorra, not the mafia, but society normally treated both criminal syndicates as identical.

In any case, while his job certainly wasn't a reputable one, Firo Prochainezo had single-handedly earned the right to continue living in this apartment.

For a long time afterward, he'd spent lonely nights in this overly large space, but...

...at this point, he had a roommate around to answer his questions.

"They used to mine it in the mountains, and it sounds as though they found a shaft that once had a vein. If they're expanding it, the possibility isn't zero...although it is admittedly close to zero. I hear California has lapis lazuli veins at least, so I believe they'll be able to keep themselves fed somehow."

“Do they even need to keep themselves fed? They drank the liquor, so they wouldn’t starve to death anyway, right?”

“Well, no, the malnutrition wouldn’t render them completely immobile, but eating would certainly allow them to work more efficiently. And they would still *feel* hungry... Although I believe that experience may be subjective. I’m not human, but I can still feel starvation if I go without food for a long time. When I was with Szilard, he didn’t feed me when I didn’t need to accompany him, so I am somewhat accustomed to the feeling, but...”

The matter-of-fact explanation belonged to a young woman who looked to be about Firo’s age.

In contrast to Firo’s youthful appearance, she had a dignity about her that made her seem older. If they were side by side and somebody told a stranger that Ennis was Firo’s big sister, they probably would have believed it.

Firo’s eyes went wide as she touched on one of the more appalling experiences of her past.

“Oh no, I, uh, I didn’t mean to bring up those awful memories, Ennis. Sorry.”

“?”

The young woman was bewildered, as though she couldn’t understand why Firo was apologizing.

Her name was Ennis.

Although she appeared to be a young woman, technically, she wasn’t human.

While it did depend on how you defined *human*, she wasn’t a person, but a being that had been created as “something resembling a person.”

She had been born as a by-product of the research into the elixir of immortality, and up until the previous year, she’d been nothing more than a pawn of her creator, an alchemist named Szilard.

Yet—following a certain incident, she’d gained her freedom.

The one holding the thread of her life was the baby-faced young man in front of her.

Ennis had heard that he was a member of a gang that was based here in town, but she couldn’t criticize him for it. When she’d been under Szilard’s thumb, she’d committed plenty of crimes herself.

At first, Ennis had struggled to understand why the young man had set her free.

When he’d brought her to this apartment, she’d realized it was because he was kind. She remembered how he’d started on dinner without saying a word—and how he’d lit up with the joy of a little child when she had taken her first bite and approved of the taste.

After that, she had no longer had any questions about the way he was treating her.

She had developed the unnecessary worry that she needed to repay his kindness, though.

She hadn't caught on, you see.

In addition to his kindness, Firo had a truly personal ulterior motive.

Firo was far too backward about these things to help Ennis pick up on his feelings. She was lovely, but not sensitive to such matters.

After all, it had been over a year since he'd inherited Szilard's relationship to her and they'd started living together—

—and not only had he not confessed his love to her or kissed her yet, he hadn't even managed to hold her hand.

The young man was a late bloomer, and the young woman was slow on the uptake, but their life together was truly fulfilling.

The unsophisticated young man was happy just to have her there with him.

He only wanted her to be happy, and simply being in love with her was enough for him.

As long as the artless woman could see the young man smiling, she was satisfied.

After all, his smile seemed to be proof that it was all right for her to be there.

Although the pair's feelings were completely different, they meshed together like a miracle—the simple honesty of children, and the scars inflicted by their past experiences.

Gradually, they were starting to understand each other: Ennis had begun to feel genuinely happy to have found a family in Firo—and Firo had begun to hope for some sort of development.



A few hours earlier An underground casino, somewhere in New York

“Hunh? What'd you say?”

The blunt question had come from a big man who was a full head taller than Firo.

Berga Gandor.

He was the second-oldest of the three brothers who ran the Gandor Family—a small, local mafia group—and he was a trusted

childhood friend of Firo.

Since they had a common acquaintance coming into town the next day, they'd started to talk about going to meet him together, but after the chitchat, Firo had brought up something odd.

"Well, you know, you married Kalia the year before last, right?"

"Y-yeah."

"What's with the stuttering? Hey, did you fight again or something?"

"Shut up. None o' your beeswax."

Apparently he'd called it in one: As Berga responded, his eyes skated away.

Smiling wryly at his old buddy's reaction, Firo asked about something he was pretty sure of already.

"I wanted to ask... How did you and Kalia end up getting married?"

"...What's that supposed to mean? You sayin' she's too good for me? Is that where you're going with this?! Huh?!"

Berga scowled, trying to intimidate him. Firo sighed and glared right back, not giving an inch.

"No way! That's not what I'm talking about! I meant...uh, you know, when you brought up tying the knot... I just wanted to know how you did it," Firo muttered, his voice shrinking as he went on.

With a sigh, Berga replied, "And here I was wondering what you were gonna say... Why come up with that now? You coulda asked all you wanted at the wedding, but now it's too embarrassing. I can't just up and tell you."

"Yeah, I know, but back then I was too embarrassed to ask."

"...Well, with me, Kalia's the one who brought it up. 'All right, then, let's get married next month,' she says, straight-faced. You think I could say no?"

"I see... So it was Kalia... That's no help..."

As Firo muttered, Berga seemed to pick up on something. With a smirk on his stern face, he asked Firo a question, half ribbing him.

"What's this all about anyway? Are you finally gonna propose to Ennis? I didn't know you'd been takin' her to bed— Hell, I didn't even know you'd kissed her yet."

At that, Firo's youthful face went bright red, and he started yelling to cover up his mortification.

"Wha...?! Oh c-c'mon, lay off! You think *that's* why I'm living with her?! Y-you think I'm sweet on her or something?!"

"Ain'tcha?"

"Uh... Well, I won't say you're a hundred percent wrong. I really did fall for her at first sight... But, uh, all that kissing and holding hands really should wait until after we, y'know, tie the knot. And she's

not even my girlfriend. We're roommates. That's all..."

Firo's reaction was naïve—overly so—and Berga's expression turned more serious.

"...Hey. Firo. Is *the incident* still getting to you?"

"Wh-what incident?"

Firo flinched, and Berga began matter-of-factly detailing the story.

"You know, back when you were a kid. That pervert thought you were a girl and snatched you, but Dad and Keith rescued you in the nick of time. Remember? Sounds like it's still..."

"Wha—?! Tha...? No way in hell! And like I said before, I didn't need help! I coulda gotten outta that all by myself, easy!"

"That's not what Luck said. He says you take your time because you think men who take advantage of women are the scum of the earth..."

"L-Luck! That bastard! H-he's full of shit, is what he is!"

As he protested, Firo's voice went shrill. Watching him, his big childhood pal sighed, knowing he'd hit the nail on the head.

Then, as if he'd remembered, he dropped the name of the common acquaintance they were going to meet the next day.

"Take a page outta Claire's book, wouldja? He's been fallin' for girls and proposing to 'em three seconds later for ages."

"Are we sure he's actually human? And that's not the first time I've wondered."

"Like you can talk? Him, or... Yeah, you could pick up a few things from those two dimwits."

"Oh, Isaac and Miria?"

I bet they wouldn't want to get called dim by this guy.

And yet the words he'd just heard struck him as a truly great idea, surprisingly.

He'd remembered how exceptionally close the couple had been, back when he'd met them.

If I could stop caring about this so much, Ennis and I could...

...hold hands, maybe...

Whoa, wait, is that— Is that allowed?

And what if Ennis doesn't want to...?

"Hey, what's the matter? Got a fever or something?"

"Huh? What?"

When he hastily looked up, he saw a tough man's face that was worlds away from Ennis's.

"Your mug is as red as a lobster, fella."

"Oh, uh, no..."

Waving his hands in an attempt to throw him off the trail, Firo turned his back, as if he was running away.

"A-anyway, I'll be meeting up with Maiza tomorrow before I head

over, so if we're lucky, we'll see each other at the station."

As the young guy climbed the stairs to the exit of the underground casino, plans for the next day and beyond were coming together in his mind, one after another.

It was, as far as Firo was concerned, the strategy of a lifetime for him and Ennis to get closer.



Once he was back at the apartment, Firo brought up that very subject with Ennis.

Apparently she was also planning to go meet Isaac and Miria, and Firo couldn't have asked for a better setup.

"I see. In that case, meet up with Maiza and swing by my casino tomorrow. We'll all head over together from there."

"All right. I'll leave from Alveare, then."

When he heard Ennis's simple answer, Firo mentally pumped his fist.

Nice. It's been a long time since we went anywhere at all together, so this is already a success.

The hurdle he'd cleared had been a very low one, but it was enough to gratify Firo.

O-okay. Now we just need to go get Isaac and Miria.

Isaac and Miria... It's not like I've known them for all that long, but I do know what they're like.

They were always all over each other.

They're bound to, you know, hold hands.

Isaac and Miria's hyperactive figures rose over and over again in the young guy's mind. Although they were doing things like holding hands or dancing in the middle of the street, his mental images were almost identical to things that had actually happened.

Then I'll say, "Let's you and me hold hands, too," and take her hand.

As he thought of what was—in his mind alone—a perfect plan, Firo's brain froze up.

.....

Once we're holding hands...wha...what am I supposed to talk about?!

Do I...tell her I like her? N-no, it's still too soon for that, isn't it?

No, wait, is it okay to hold hands before I've told her I like her?!

Dammit, it's not like I can even ask anybody about this stuff...

Firo Prochainezo.

Up until now, he'd had virtually no experience with women, and so—

—he not only didn't understand women's hearts but didn't know how to handle his own romantic feelings.

Was this good or bad?

It would be years—or rather decades—before he knew.



Several days later The speakeasy Alveare

“...”

Firo abruptly came to his senses.

A little while after the Flying Pussyfoot's arrival, he realized he had been reflecting on the fact that he was setting up domino tiles.

What the heck am I doing?

That's right: At the moment, he was lining up dominos.

As soon as Isaac and Miria arrived in New York, they'd started raving about being dominists and bought up a ton of dominos—

And now, inside Alveare, a modest domino craze was under way.

They used dominos separated by color to create various designs, then knocked them all down with the touch of a fingertip: the catharsis brought about by construction and destruction.

Firo had been engrossed in this task, but as if struck by a flash of inspiration, he remembered his reason for being there.

Oh, right. Ennis. I was going to...

I was gonna use Isaac and Miria as an excuse to develop my relationship with Ennis.

So why am I setting up dominos?

Oh yeah. What with Czes coming to stay with us, that kinda got lost in the shuffle.

Reflecting on his behavior and wondering what the heck he was doing at his age, he raised his head, intending to stop.

And right there, kneeling like he was and setting up tiles, was Ennis.

“...!”

“What's the matter, Firo?” Ennis asked calmly.

Firo suddenly found something else to look at. “N-nah... I was just thinking it's almost lunchtime. So, um, we should probably...”

He was about to ask her to have lunch with him, but in the next instant—

—a pair of voices butted in with no regard for Firo’s feelings at the moment.

“Hey, Firo! I heard from Pezzo and the fellas: You’re the president of a casino now?”

“Yes, cards! And slots! Roulette! Monopoly evenings!”

When he looked up, a man and woman were standing there, grinning freely.

Isaac and Miria’s eyes were sparkling, and Firo sighed as he answered them.

“No, I’m not the president... And what’s a Monopoly evening anyway?”

Whether or not they’d heard his question, Isaac and Miria began shaking Firo’s shoulders roughly from either side.

“Say, c’mon, take us there, would you?! I’ve always dreamed about being a gambler!”

“Yes, and you serve milk to children, right?! And then you dash it in your enemy’s face, right?!”

“You both cheat, and once you pick up on it, you shoot at each other!”

“Yes, if you lose, you get lead poisoning! If you win, they hang you! Both sides get punished for fighting!”

“We don’t have tables like the two-bit saloon counters in a Western.”

As Firo listened to the couple, he lost track of his plan again. It was a contradiction: As he watched the couple, the desire to be like them—or at least, to get a little closer to Ennis—got fainter and fainter.

Without even registering this change in his own mental state, Firo smiled wryly. “It is what it is, I guess... In exchange, don’t blame me if you lose your shirt.”

In the end, Firo got badgered into taking Isaac and Miria to the casino.

“See you later.”

When he turned around at the sound of the soft voice, Ennis was smiling.

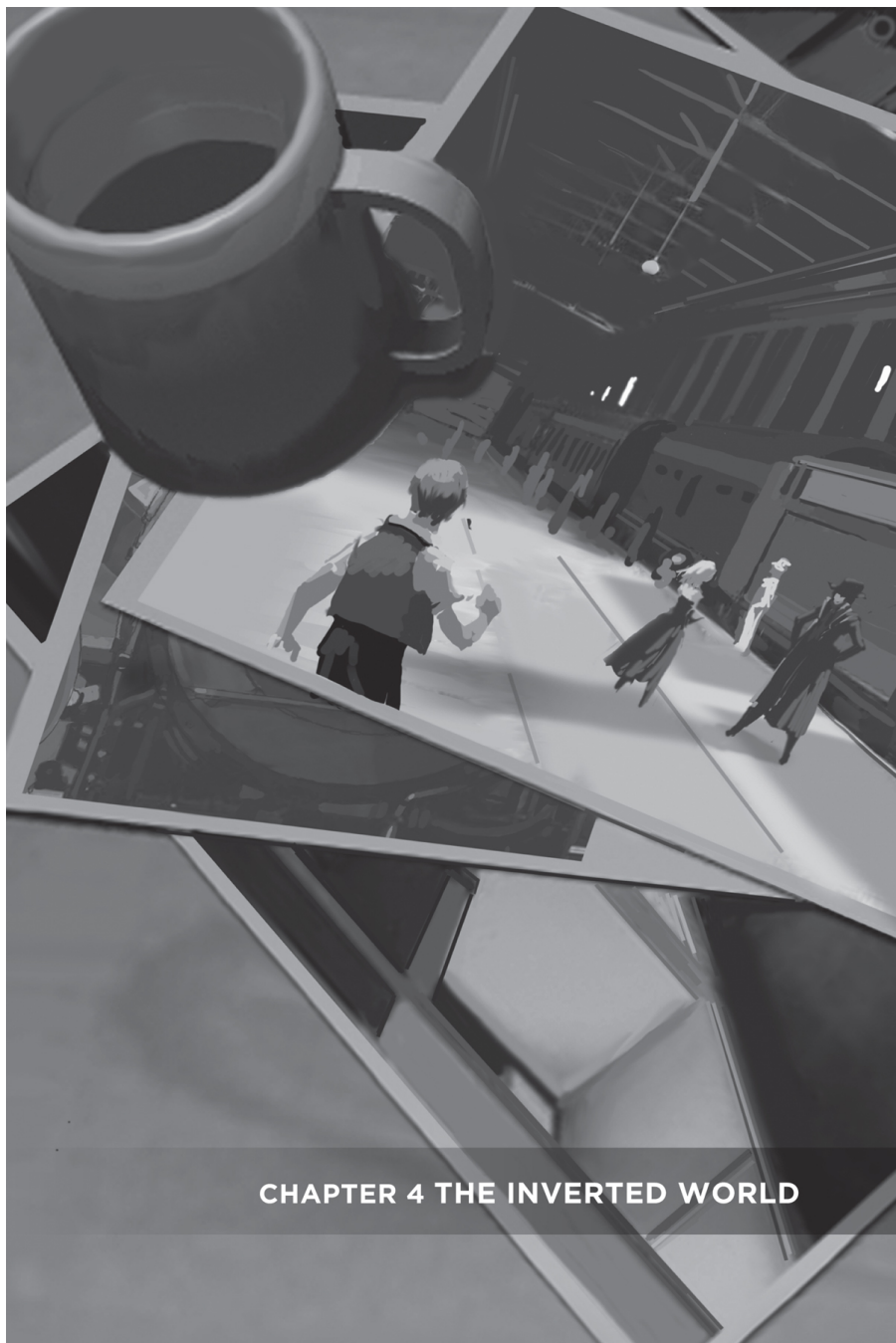
Firo didn’t feel quite settled about all this, but that one smile from her was enough to dispel all the gloomy clouds in his heart.

Once again, the simple, innocent gangster smiled and thought, *This is plenty good.*

He believed that this situation, in which he was able to smile that

way, was the greatest happiness there was.





CHAPTER 4 THE INVERTED WORLD

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THE INVERTED WORLD

January 1982, New York, in front of Alveare

“...I heard he was here, but...”

It was dusk, and the chill in the air made it extremely obvious that it was winter.

A woman who was dressed for a society outing was standing quietly in relatively poorly lit New York alley, which contained an establishment whose light and aroma made it stand out from the rest.

It was called Alveare, a honey shop.

The sweet scent tickled her nostrils, and it felt as if she might be able to fill her belly simply by standing there.

“Is that boy really here...? He can’t be. Maybe the president was just pulling my leg.”

As she murmured, Rachel—often referred to as the “woman in coveralls” during a recent incident—was remembering the events that had happened at the end of the previous year.

The Flying Pussyfoot affair.

As far as the world was concerned, the matter had been covered up, but she had been involved in it under two different identities.

One was a gofer for an information broker.

The other was a criminal who repeatedly stole rides on trains.

She was a sort of junior employee for the information broker—at the DD newspaper—and she’d been on that train because she was bringing home information about an event in Chicago.

She hadn’t bought a proper ticket, though. She’d ridden without paying.

Now that she’d stopped, her reason for stealing rides struck her as a silly one, but Rachel had done it for revenge.

A railway company had hung her father out to dry. She’d wanted to hate the railways themselves, and yet because her father had loved them, deep down, she hadn’t been able to. Ride-stealing seemed to be the only real revenge she could take.

After the incident was over, something about it had continued to nag at her, and so she’d gone to her employer, the president of the information brokerage.

“I’m sure a child was killed on that train,” she told him.

She’d seen it clearly.

The moment when the red shadow had pressed the boy against the rails, and half of his body had been ground away.

He can’t possibly be alive, she’d thought.

But that monstrous red conductor had said something that bothered her.

On the train, when she’d asked about the boy...

“Just ask the guy in person later.”

His tone was so casual.

His words could have meant “I’ll send you to hell so you can ask him yourself,” but his demeanor hadn’t seemed right for that.

Pandemonium had broken out shortly afterward, but Rachel had seen the boy—once. She’d assumed he was a corpse at the time—he’d been lashed to the underside of a car earlier—but a gunslinger and a woman in a red dress had been holding him when they fell off the train.

She’d reached out in an attempt to save them—and, thanks to an assist from the red monster, she’d at least managed to keep from losing them.

But what had happened to the gunslinger and the others afterward?

Even if they had been pulled back up, they’d been dashed against the ground once, and they could easily have been seriously injured.

That doubt had stayed with her, and so she’d made up her mind and checked with the president of the information brokerage.

The boy’s corpse had been covered up by the corporation as well.

She’d already braced herself for the bad news, but from behind his stacks of documents, the president had responded nonchalantly:

You could just go ask him yourself, in person.

A few hours later...

Here she was, standing in front of Alveare.

Still... I can’t picture the president joking about a child’s death...

With no idea what was going on, for now, Rachel walked into the shop.

When she told the tough proprietress to let her “inside,” the woman had warned her, *I haven’t seen you here before... There are a lot of nasty customers in there, so remember to keep your head*, and had shown her through the door into the speakeasy.

Then, once she was inside, she’d seen the place in its entirety.

This place is huge.

The splendor of the speakeasy's interior was impossible to imagine from the way the place looked from the street, and Rachel nearly gulped in spite of herself. However, she managed to play it cool somehow and began searching for an empty seat.

As the proprietress had said, lots of the customers were obviously on the wrong side of the law.

There was an old Asian fellow whose powerful frame rocked as he laughed.

A man with sharp eyes that made him very hard to approach.

A man who was muttering to himself with an unsettling smile on his face.

A middle-aged man with a large scar on his neck who seemed like a veteran fighter.

A dignified man, getting on in years, who was adding a generous amount of pepper to his food.

From the smiling, bespectacled young man who initially seemed out of place, to the beanpole-and-roly-poly duo who were obviously gangsters—

Something about mixture of races and occupations here reminded her of the dining car on the Flying Pussyfoot.

There was even a young child near the empty seat she finally found.

Wondering what a kid like that would be ordering at a speakeasy, Rachel peeked over into that seat—

And made eye contact with the boy.

“Huh...?”

In that instant, Rachel's heart froze.

She looked stunned, and the boy she was staring at seemed bewildered himself.

“? What's the matter, lady?” he asked.

He spoke like a child...but she remembered his voice.

His scream, specifically.

This was the voice she'd heard screaming as his body was ground away.

“How...?”

The word had slipped out of her involuntarily, and the boy gave her a dubious expression.

“? Wh-what, huh? Is there something on my face?”

“On that train... I could've sworn you died...”

“!”

In response to Rachel's words, the boy's expression underwent a conspicuous change.

“Um, 'scuse me, Ennis, I'm going to go take a short walk!”

Speaking to the young woman who'd been sitting across from him, the boy stood up, leaving the honeyed juice he'd been drinking on the table, and started hurrying out of the speakeasy.

Rachel followed him, leaving through the shop she'd just entered from. There was a risk they'd think she had no intention of buying anything to begin with, or maybe they would panic that she was an agent on an investigation, but at this point, she wasn't capable of rational judgments.



“Oho? What’ve we got here?”

“Hey, c’mon, that kid ain’t on the market.”

As they headed outside together, a boy of only ten or so and a young woman probably about a decade his senior, light heckling followed them out of the speakeasy.

“What, did that little wannabe grownup get himself a girl already?”

“Talk about a smooth operator.”

The skinny guy and the fat guy tossed crude remarks after them, but Rachel didn’t hear.

He’s alive.

She’d been sure the boy had lost half his body, but he didn’t have a single scar on him. It was as if nothing had happened.

It can’t be.

Common sense was like a wall inside her turning back the reality in front of her.

That’s not possible.

Maybe he’d had a twin brother.

Of course. This one was probably being pressured by Nebula, coerced into covering up the situation.

Privately reaching that conclusion, Rachel forced her heart to calm down as she walked out, but—

In an alley right next to the shop, the boy checked to make sure no one was nearby, then spoke to her.

“You saw me die, didn’t you, Miss?”

“...”

“Was it when I got shot in the head? Or when I got held against the tracks?”

The boy’s remarks brought Rachel’s expectations crashing down.

She was completely out of options, and she forgot what she’d planned to say.

The boy looked up at her with patently suspicious eyes. Then he broke the silence by introducing himself.

“...I’m Thomas. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Oh, um, I’m Rachel...”

She’d easily responded with her own name, and for some reason, the boy seemed more relieved than she would have expected. When he looked at her again, the wariness was finally gone from his eyes.

“I see... So you’re not an immortal. That’s a relief. Did you find me by coincidence?”

“No, uh... The president of the *Daily Days* told me to go there...”

There were all sorts of things she wanted to ask this boy, but the

shock of learning that he was alive kept the words in her throat, and she ended up being the one to answer questions.

She regretted carelessly mentioning the *Daily Days*, but as it turned out, it provided a shot in the arm to the conversation.

"...Oh, the information brokerage... So if I lie to you here, you'll find out the truth. I won't lie, then. My real name is Czeslaw Meyer. You can call me Czes."

"Huh?"

The boy had given a completely different name as his real one. She was confused; why had he lied earlier?

She stayed frozen, still not sure how to answer. Czes exhaled deeply, then began to speak, slowly.

"...If you're that surprised, I suppose I should start by explaining the immortals, correct?"

"Im...mortals?"

"It's fine. It was a relief to find out you weren't one, so I'll answer any questions you have."

The boy's smile was the sort of expression he might have worn when playing a prank.

...Yet, something about it seemed rather mature to her.

The thirty minutes that Czes spent talking became an indelible memory for Rachel.

The wintery cold had grown sharper, but her excitement kept the chill at bay.

Everything he said about himself sounded like a tall tale, and yet the fact of his existence proved it was real.

When he clawed at his own arm, and she saw the scraped skin regenerate instantly, she wondering if she was actually dreaming after all.

The incident on the Flying Pussyfoot had nearly turned her whole world inside out, and this time, the inversion was clear and unshakable.

Immortality.

Merely admitting its existence completely recolored her understanding of the world.

...Even though the world itself hadn't changed one bit.

"...That should do for now, don't you think, Miss Rachel?"

It was an innocent child's voice, but it did feel as if there was a mature personality hiding behind it.

"Y-yes... I'm grateful for...your help."

"It's fine. Oh, and feel free to talk to me like I'm a child, all right? I may be older, but it feels strange otherwise."

“O-okay. Thanks, Czes.”

A single piece of information just turned my world inside out.

At the same time, in that moment, she'd gotten a definite sense of the power information held.

Before now, as a gofer for the information broker, she'd collected all sorts of news, but this piece held power that far surpassed all of it.

Information can change the world. It can change human destinies.

Revolting as he was, Henry had been right about that.

Is the world brimming over with information like this?

“Really, Czes, thank you.”

“Huh?”

“I think...I've figured out something about my life, thanks to you.”

“? I don't know how I helped, but...good for you.”

I'll become an information broker.

I won't be a gofer the way I have been. I want to be in charge of more information, like the president or vice president.

If she knew the right “information,” she might be able to keep other people from meeting a fate like her father's.

She hadn't yet decided how she'd use the information she'd acquired or what sort of broker she'd become—but the intel she obtained later on would probably determine that.

Once I get back to the paper, I'll ask the president.

How could she become a broker like them?

How could she become a full employee of the DD newspaper?

This was probably the first truly important information she'd acquired, and so—

—in the midst of the cold, wintery dusk, her eyes shone brightly.

It was almost as if a new world had opened up before her.

If things had ended there, the day would have been a happy one for Rachel and Czes, but—

At least for Czes, the day did not end pleasantly.

“Heya.”

As Rachel and Czes emerged from the alley, a voice greeted them casually.

“?” “?”

As questions rose in both their minds, the young man spoke to them in a friendly way.

“Man, oh man, talk about a coincidence. I stopped by to see my old pal Firo, but they tell me he took a couple friends and went to the casino. I don’t wanna get in his way when he’s with guests, so I was on my way home, and look who I ran into. What are you two doing? When did you become buddies?”

“Huh?”

Is he a journalist for the DD newspaper?

No wait, that voice... I’ve heard it somewhere...

“...Who are you, mister?” Czes asked.

Neither he nor Rachel could place him, and they watched him dubiously. They wondered if it might be some new kind of scam, but the voice really did seem familiar somehow.

“Who am I...? Ouch. Sure, I changed my clothes, and I’m not covered in other fellas’ blood, but...”

Still wearing a light and breezy smile, the man said something truly ominous.

“Wouldn’t you normally remember the voice of a guy *who tried to kill you?*”

“Wha...?”

Rachel couldn’t shake an ever-growing sense of wrongness, attempting to pry the lid off her memories.

However, she got the feeling that this was one lid she shouldn’t open.

As she was hesitating over whether to remember or not, the man dropped another airy comment about wanton violence.



“Oh, yeah, relax. The train got in safely, and I’ll give you a break and quit killing you constantly. And you, Miss Stowaway. I hear you bought proper tickets after that. Good going. You finally did what everyone else does when they want to ride a train.”

Those words stirred up certainty and fear inside both Czes and Rachel.

Rachel’s was a memory of the fear she’d felt back then—but the tremendous terror that surfaced inside Czes was still in progress.

“Ah...ah...no... Noooo...AaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAaugh!”

Screaming as if he was trying to negate everything inside him, Czes fled into the alley with incredible speed. His legs were as powerful as an animal’s, and despite his immortality, biological instinct had taken over.

The “predator” who’d made him remember those instincts murmured, looking a little disgruntled.

“I *just* told him to relax...”

Don’t ask the impossible.

Retorting, but only in the privacy of her own head, she examined the young man.

The creature who’d planted indelible terror in her heart during the train incident—

The conductor.

The image of his uniform, dyed red, surfaced in her mind.

But right now, he was dressed normally, and he seemed like an ordinary young man who was simply walking around town. He didn’t seem like he was holding down a regular job, but there was nothing particularly abnormal about him, either. He seemed to be a casual and carefree young man.

With a smile that didn’t betray a particle of his earlier brutality, the blithe young man in question tossed a casual invitation Rachel’s way.

“Well, since we’re here, want to go grab something to eat at that speakeasy over there? I was just thinking about asking a woman for advice, especially one I already know.”



When Rachel walked back into the speakeasy, she could feel the stares of the people around her.

“H-hey, Czes came back all grown up!”

“What kinda trick is that?! Did he use a twin and make a break for it?!”

The fact that she'd brought the conductor back in Czes's place sent a mild commotion through the speakeasy. Nonetheless, it didn't take them long to realize that the guy was a completely different person, at which point they gradually went back to their own topics and stopped paying attention to them.

For the moment, the pair looked around for an empty table, then sat down opposite each other and ordered their meals without giving it much thought.

"Um... And your name was...?"

"Oh, it was Claire Stanfield, but now, I go by Felix Walken. It's a long story."

"Huh..."

She was curious about what had made him change his name, but since he'd said he had something he wanted to talk about, she couldn't bring herself to pursue the issue.

To be fair, she couldn't imagine that asking would have gotten her a decent answer anyway...

"I don't know if you already know or not, but I'm Rachel. It's good to meet you. So... What did you want advice on?"

Keeping her introduction brief, Rachel promptly broached the main subject. She thought it would be faster to listen to what the guy had to say rather than to fumble around trying to learn about him.

"Well, there's this doll I like, and I want to let her know that. What do you think is the best way to go about it? Oh, and it's not you, Rachel, don't worry."

"...Maybe to start, you should do something about that insensitivity of yours. Although I'm still glad to hear it," she responded frankly, rather put off by his bluntness.

That said, her own life had been very unlike that of an "ordinary girl." How well would she be able to answer this question? The thought made her slightly tense.

Well, it's not as if he'll kill me the moment I give him a bad answer. At least...I don't think...he will...

There was still far too much she didn't know about the man in front of her.

She didn't intend to open up to him, but she was also careful not to get on his bad side by being overly wary. Little by little, she got into the details of his request.

"...So this girl. You've actually met?"

"Yeah, I met her for the first time on that train. We weren't together long, and we split up, but...she left me this letter. Yeah, I've got the whole thing memorized, word for word: 'I'll be waiting in Manhattan. I'll wait for you forever. Please, please look for me. I'll look for you as well.'"

“Huh. I can’t say this all makes sense to me, but it sounds like you’ve got a decent shot with her.”

Had he just wanted to brag about his love life?

Despite her suspicions, she encouraged the “monster” to go on with his story.

“Well, the thing is, I don’t actually know if she’s trying to kill me, or if she wants to see me because she likes me.”

“...Huh?”

What was this guy saying?

Apparently she’d signed up to give advice for a pretty sticky issue.

Thoughts like those filled her mind for a while, but then she remembered that common sense hadn’t carried any weight with this man in the first place, and she moved the conversation along in spite of her conflicted feelings.

“...W-well, all right. If she *is* planning to kill you, what are you going to do? Are you going to kill her?”

This didn’t seem like a conversation to have in a public place, but when she checked around them, every table was talking about things like “So when I ripped his XX off...” and “Why don’t you just snuff them?” and “Go on, rub him out” and “But offing ’em would be a pain in the ass”...so Rachel decided not to worry about it.

The conductor answered with the same leisurely calm as before.

“Mm, nah. It was on the list of options at first, but even if she’s planning on killing me, I wouldn’t exactly assume that means she *doesn’t* love me, so...”

“...I have no idea what you want me to say here.”

“Well, hang on a second. She might love me so much she wants to kill me, or then there’s the *I really do like him, but I’m killing him for the sake of something more important* routine. That’s possible.”

“Personally, that sounds too complicated for me.”

It was a perfectly natural criticism, but the conductor ducked it easily.

“Really? It wouldn’t bother me much... Well, whatever. Frankly, up till now, whenever I fell for somebody, I’d propose immediately, and if she turned me down, I’d move right along and talk to the next doll.”

“Talk about a completely hopeless pattern... Couldn’t you just do that this time, then?” she’d answered almost carelessly.

At that point, for the first time, the conductor’s pace faltered.

“Erm... That’s the thing. I thought so too at first, but...whenever I see the letter she left, or remember her fighting that white suit to the death, or think about that expressionless, wordless face of hers...I guess you could say I like her more and more. Come to think of it, maybe when I first said I’d help her... That might not have been

sympathy. It might have been a fated, love-at-first-sight thing.”

The man looked away, muttering at length to himself. It might have been her imagination, but she thought she saw his cheeks flush a little.

“...Just now, it crossed my mind for the first time that you might be human. Although I’m not sure about the *fighting to the death* part...”

She didn’t think a normal person would say this sort of thing to someone they’d only run into twice, but from the things he’d done on the train and during the few minutes of their conversation, she understood that this guy wasn’t normal, so she didn’t let it bother her.

“What, you didn’t think of me as human before now? Well, that’s not important. Frankly, I’m confused, too.”

The conductor looked even more human then, and Rachel almost felt a little goodwill toward him as a fellow human being—but his next words extinguished it instantly.

“Well, I’m sure it’ll work out. It may take time, but I know it’ll work out. If she says she doesn’t think anything of me now, I’ll get her to love me. Even if it takes years.”

In the future, that mind-set would inevitably have gotten him labeled a stalker. Yet, there was no trace of clingy desperation in the conductor’s words, and despite her exasperation with him, she decided to give him a few pieces of advice.

I’m starting to feel bad for the girl this guy says he’s fallen for.

She had to at least teach him a humane approach.

From what he’d told her, the object of his affections wasn’t exactly normal herself, but she couldn’t possibly be as far removed from humanity as this guy was. Making that call, Rachel moved the conversation along.

“So you’ll start by searching for this girl?”

“No, actually, I already know where she is.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yeah... I heard it from one of your information brokers.”

Ah, I see. The information’s solid, then.

She didn’t know which staff member he’d heard it from, but if a DD newspaper employee had answered him as an information broker, they were sure to have done their homework. In that sense, Rachel was happy that the intel she’d brought in was being transmitted properly.

“I see... In that case, your initial attempt will be pretty important.”

Ordinarily, it would be better to write or call her on the telephone, make an appointment, and then meet her, but it wasn’t clear whether the girl liked him or had it in for him. Rachel got the feeling that even if the girl showed up at the rendezvous spot with a

tommy gun, this guy would probably just give her wave and a hello. Still, if she could, she wanted to avoid contributing to a lethal conflict.

Since I decided I'm going to become an information broker, I'll have to be able to field requests like this one easily...

She might not have had the distinction between dealing in information and a request for everyday advice down yet, but Rachel was gradually beginning to think seriously.

An ordinary love consultation would have been one thing, but to all appearances, this guy was nowhere near ordinary.

On top of that, she could guess that the girl was going to be tricky to deal with as well.

"Let's see... If you want to suss out her feelings, why not send her a present with your letter?"

She was grasping at straws, but when he heard her suggestion, the conductor thought for a little, then began nodding as if she'd convinced him.

"I see. A present, huh?"

"Right, a gift that's just right for her. If she accepts it and it makes her happy, that probably means she wants to meet you on good terms, you know?"

"I see."

Relieved that the guy seemed satisfied, Rachel told him the rest of what she'd been thinking.

"If she wants to kill you, she might throw it away or have some other more subtle reaction. That said, you obviously shouldn't spy on her in her room, so...maybe it should be something you can see her wearing around town, an accessory or something like that."

"Oho... Hey, you're smart."

The answer hadn't struck her as a particularly bright one, but the idea that this superman had complimented her gave her a complicated mixture of happiness and futility.

"Hmm... She looks like she's got about all the knives she needs..."

"...I won't ask too many questions about your sweetheart."

The complicated emotion vanished immediately, and in its place, a cloud of tiresome questions flooded her mind.

"You sure? She's a pretty little thing. Knives and military duds would probably look great on her..."

"I don't really see what those have to do with each other, but...if she's that unusual, why not give her clothes that are more like what an ordinary girl would wear?"

It wasn't only this guy; the object of his affections was also pretty detached from the real world. That much seemed patently clear.

That said, considering the guy's personality, he might say that military uniforms and knives would make the perfect gift for anyone

from five-year-old tots to ninety-year-old grandmothers, but she deliberately decided not to consider that possibility.

“Okay, got it! A present! Right!”

After he’d heard her out, the conductor stood, pulling on the coat that he’d hung on the back of his chair, and flashed Rachel a bright smile and a thumbs-up. “That was a big help. As thanks, I’ll pick up the check for this.”

“No need for chivalry.”

“No, no. These things should be done right.” The guy threw out his chest proudly. “Hey, waitress! Send our bill to Firo!”

“Uh, what? Isn’t Firo your friend from before...?”

“Well, I dunno when he’ll be back here, see? Now he’ll come find me later to get his money back, right? It’ll save me some trouble.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he will...”

Rachel didn’t feel quite satisfied, but she decided that if he’d been able to stay friends with a guy like this for years, this Firo person must also be some kind of weirdo, and she sighed. “...Maybe I really should have been more thorough about teaching him common sense.”

A few minutes later...

Well, most girls would probably be put off if someone sent them clothes out of the blue.

Still, any girl who’d go out with him probably shouldn’t get flustered over things like that...

After the guy had gone, she polished off the rest of the meal, then quietly left the speakeasy.

As she was walking out the door, a mixed group entered.

“Dammit... What a lousy dealer. Why couldn’t he at least drop the ball when the stakes were low?”

From behind the muttering voice, a lively voice rang out.

“Boy did I ever rake it in today! I put all my coins on lucky number seven, and it actually came up!”

“Isaac, you’re amazing!”

“Okay, we’re celebrating today! We’ll eat every dish in the place. All of us together!”

“Yaaaay! Isaac, you’re such a big spender!”

“Heh-heh-heh... Even if it’s a dish you can’t finish off by yourself, if there are three of you, you’ll have the wisdom of Mouri... In other words, when you can’t clean your plate on your own, if you divvy it up among everybody, it makes you smarter! I dunno who Mouri is, but the name sort of sounds like Moses, so I bet he’s somebody great.”

“Yes, the weak dine, the strong survive!”

“That’s right, I’m pretty sure it was a story about three brothers

who were great pals: Mouri wasn't able to part the waters by himself, but when he and his two brothers chopped at them together, they split."

"Yes, the miracle of familial love!"

It made very little sense, but the man and woman's innocent conversation warmed the atmosphere of the shop around them.

"Yeah... If you can, drop all that money here, wouldja? Cut down on our losses a little..."

She'd seen that couple somewhere before, and the guy in front of them—who was wearing a pale green suit and muttering to himself—was still young enough to pass for a boy.

From the looks of him, he didn't appear to be a respectable citizen, but he'd walked into the place with a couple who appeared to be nothing else.

And—there was a child hiding behind that couple.

It was Czes, the immortal boy who'd fled from the conductor a short while earlier.

When he spotted Rachel outside the speakeasy, he glanced around, then asked her a fearful question.

"Th-that guy... He's gone?"

When she nodded, he drew a breath of deep relief, then smiled.

Watching him, Rachel also gave a rather relieved smile herself.

"Ha-ha... Even if you are immortal, you're no different from a human. You get happy, you get scared... I thought you'd be above all that somehow."

"...Hmph. It's nothing that great. See you around."

Czes's smile promptly vanished, and he turned away, rapidly disappearing into the speakeasy on the heels of the couple and the baby face.

As she watched him go, looking very human, Rachel murmured to herself.

"Still... The girl that monster has taken a shine to... I wonder what she's like."



"Huh? A bill for me? What's that about?"

After Rachel had gone, the young man in the pale green suit started shouting inside Alveare.

"Felix Walken...? Wha—? Who the hell is that?!"



A few days later, Row, Eve Genoard's second residence

"..."

In a mansion with a dazzlingly elegant interior, Chané stood frozen.

"What's the matter, Chané? I heard you got a package a minute ago."

Jacuzzi, who had been released from the hospital miraculously quickly, spoke to the petrified Chané. He was still using crutches, and he could only walk a little at a time, but for a guy who'd snuck out of the hospital while he was still in recovery, he was doing very well.

Through Fang and Jon's connections, Jacuzzi's group had gotten permission to stay in this mansion as housekeepers. Chané had moved in with them, and they'd gradually grown accustomed to her peculiarities.

She never spoke, so her silence now was nothing strange, but the stiff way she was standing had struck him as unusual. He'd called to her, concerned. Yet...

Nice was there, too, and she leaned in to see the contents of the package. "Oh, wow... Those clothes! What a lovely white dress!"

The dress that was spread out in front of Chané was a simple, elegant thing, the type a sheltered girl from a distinguished family might have worn.

"Is this what was in that parcel?! How wonderful... Who on earth is it from?"

"Wow. That's really something. I bet it'll look really good on you, Chané."

As Jacuzzi spoke, he glanced casually at the sender's name, which was written on the package, and—

"Huh...?"

The moment he saw it, just like Chané, Jacuzzi froze up.

The Rail Tracer.

It was the legend they'd encountered on the Flying Pussyfoot.

A red-stained monster who had melted into the dawn, leaving many mysteries behind.

"Wh-what...does that mean?"

While Jacuzzi was petrified by the name, which had come completely out of left field, Chané's heart was also sinking into a vortex of self-directed questions.

What is he trying to do?

Clothes...? No one except Father has ever given me anything like this

before.

When I was small, Father often had clothes made for me, and they made me very happy.

But what should I feel about getting clothes from that man?

He may prove an obstacle to my father, and I'll have to kill him.

I don't know. I don't know.

Why would that man give me a present?

What could possibly be in it for him?

I understand him even less now.

Don't dwell on it. He's an obstacle to Father's plan. I have to think about killing him and nothing else.

An obstacle to Father...?

No, that's not right. He said he'd protect Father.

He said he'd marry me so he could.

...Marriage.

Marriage wasn't something that interested me, but I do know what it is.

It's a ritual. A man and woman who need each other consolidate their relationship by becoming "family."

Family.

Would it be like my relationship with Father, then?

But what meaning could it have for him?

I don't understand what he was thinking when he said a thing like that.

But if I accept him...he'll probably protect Father.

The things he said to me...didn't seem to be lies. That's why I'm so confused.

In that case...should I take him up on his proposal?

I'm the one who's afraid. I'm the one who wants to kill that man.

What am I afraid of?

No, no, I shouldn't use Father as an excuse to justify my own fear!

What a fool I am.

What was that man thinking when he proposed marriage to someone this foolish?

I could never support someone else the way Father supports me.

Why would he send me a thing like—?

?

Abruptly, Chané realized that a small crowd had formed around her.

"?!"

Jacuzzi's friends were holding the dress, comparing its dimensions with Chané's figure and murmuring to each other with expectant eyes.

"Whoa... So who's this Rail Tracer fella?"

“Wow! I bet this’ll look real good on her!”

“I dunno. I think it would look better on my little sister.”

“You ain’t got no little sister.”

“I mean my future little sister.” “Get yourself a girlfriend first.”

“Little sisters before girlfriends!” “Why exactly?!”

“Ah-ha-ha, Miss Chané, you’ve been gazing at that dress for a solid 136 seconds, you know.”

“It’s the bee’s knees, Chané! The cat’s meow!”

“Hya-haah!”

“Hya-haw.”

When did this happen?!

She was stunned.

She’d known Jacuzzi and Nice were here—they’d spoken to her, after all—but to think this many people had entered the room...

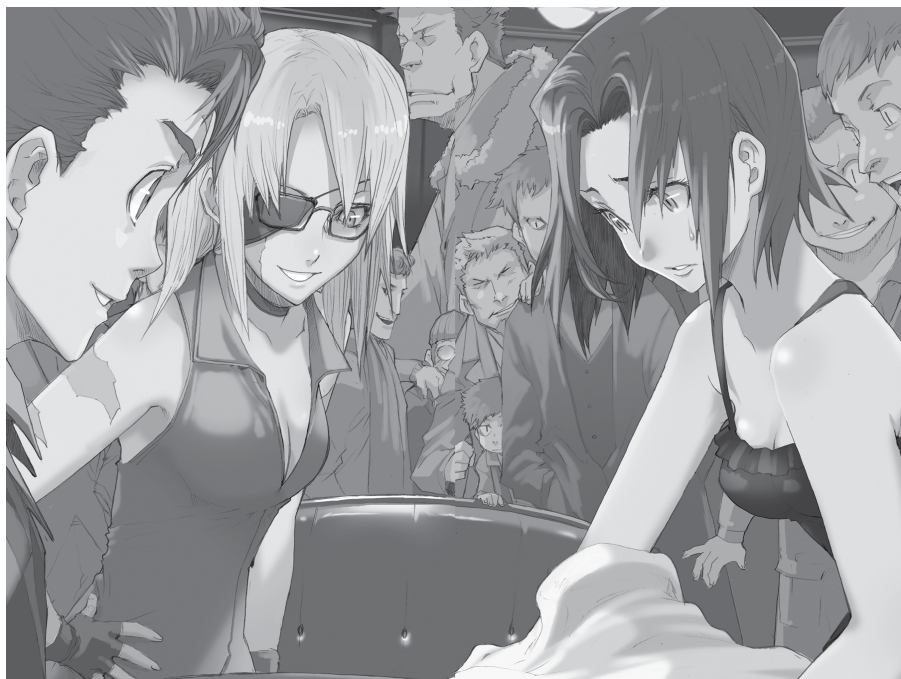
Most of her attention had been focused on her doubts about “that man,” but no matter how she thought about it... No matter how she thought about it, this wasn’t right.

In the past, with the Lemures, she never would have let her guard down that way even in her deepest contemplations.

And yet she’d let people like these, who hadn’t even been trained to avoid detection, get this close to her. Why?

She’d only been out of active combat for a little while, and yet she was already this soft?

The idea that her senses had dulled made her anxious, but there was another possibility that she was careful not to consider.



This doesn't mean I've accepted them, does it? No!

She was still protecting her solitary world—she could not allow this to happen.

She was frankly dismayed, and she silently berated herself for her lack of experience.

Oblivious to her situation, the good-natured delinquents geared up to inflict yet another trial on her.

“Say, Chané! Hurry up and try that on!”

Huh?

“Yeah, we’ll step outside while you slip into it.”

No, that isn't the problem...

“Hang on— As her friends, don’t we have a duty to watch her change?”

“Hold the phone. I heard a swell idea just now.”

“Pardon? One more time.”

“As her friends, don’t we have a duty to watch her...?”

“...Gentlemen, I believe this calls for an explosion.”

“Stop it, Nice. Don’t take a bomb out of your shirt while you’re smiling like that. Seriously, stop it.”

“Maaan! I missed seeing her take that out!” “What devastating regret...!” “From her shirt... Uh, where exactly?!”

“.....”

“Stop it, Nice. Don’t take out matches while you’re smiling like that. Seriously, quit.”

“Well, let’s leave these lunkheads and head out for a walk!”

What are they saying?

“We’ll go discover our new selves!”

I don't want to discover a new self.

“Okay, then hurry up and shuck off what you’re wearing now.”

Just be quiet. I'll never wear a thing like this.

Not because it's a present from that man.

I can't fight in... Um...?

Mid-thought, she took another glance at the dress and realized that it didn’t actually seem any harder to fight in than what she currently had on.

What surprised her even more was that on the back of the dress there were fittings that seemed meant to hold something in place.

At first glance, they appeared to be embroidery, but it didn’t take Chané long to figure out what they were.

Are they there to hold knives?

The realization that the dress had definitely been made specifically for her pushed her into further confusion.

As questions continued to surface in her mind, the surrounding

delinquents spoke up from behind her, plunging the confused girl to the bottom of the abyss.

“G’on, just put it on.”

“Damn, I can feel a nosebleed coming on from picturing it.”

“That nosebleed’s been in progress for twenty-three seconds already.”

“Actually, who is that?! Is the guy who sent this her fella?! She has a fella?!”

“Hya-haah.”

And then Chané—



Millionaires’ Row Inside a certain private car

“Hey, Mr. Graham? Somebody just came out.”

“...Is that right? Let’s hope this doesn’t turn into a boring story. Ahh, ahh... Boredom is a sin. We don’t spend the limited time we’ve been given lazing around or drowning in pleasure; instead, we squander it by simply existing... I can’t take this! Boredom is a sin! Die! Die, boredom!”

“Good luck with killing a concept... Oh, hang on, look... There’s one doll who doesn’t fit with the rest of ’em. I bet that’s her.”

At his subordinate’s words, Graham slowly sat up from where he’d been lying in the backseat.

“Whoa...,” his follower continued. “She’s a real cute little kitten... And she’s dressed like a rich doll, too. She has to be the one.”

“Think of stretches of boredom as coffee breaks. They exist so that you can hit the high points of life in peak condition... Damn, one look at a beautiful dame like her and I’m writing proverbs.”

“Proverbs...? Anyway, you do think she’s actually Eve Genoard?”

Although Graham’s delinquent friend had just declared that she had to be the one, he urged Graham to check— In the unlikely event that he was wrong, he did not want a wrench to clock him.

Graham cracked his neck and grinned. “I’d like to posit that if she ain’t the one, the mistake will add spice to our lives. After all, there’s not a single boring thing in this world.”

“You said something completely different a minute ago, boss. You okay? Your head okay?”

“Shaft...ever since you passed out that one time, you’ve been fearless.”

Looking at his outspoken buddy, Graham wondered dubiously whether this was really the same guy he’d nearly killed a few days

back. If this was how it was going to be, maybe he actually should have cracked his skull open then.

Whether or not he knew what Graham was thinking, Shaft responded in a weary manner, “The sadness of encountering my impending death inspired my growth... Huh? I think they’re going for a walk. Several of them started off together.”

“I see. In that case, let’s tell a sad story.

“...For them, that is.”



On the broad avenue of Millionaires’ Row, the denizens of the neighborhood normally averted their eyes from delinquents like Jacuzzi’s gang, but today, their attention was focused on the group.

After all, a beautiful girl as refreshing as a clear wind was walking right at the center of them.

White skin. Glossy black hair. Golden eyes.

Even in her usual black dress, she turned heads, but the dress she was wearing today enhanced her beauty even more, making her the target of both adoring and envious looks from all passersby.

However, Chané was completely oblivious to her own charms, and she’d decided that the attention on her was solely due to her wearing something that didn’t suit her.

I actually put it on.

She hadn’t been able to completely dismiss the pushy urging from the friends around her, and in the end, Chané had changed into the dress *that man* had given her.

Why is it, no matter what I do, they throw me off-balance?

Jacuzzi and the other delinquents were a type of gang that Chané hadn’t encountered before.

They weren’t like her father. They also weren’t like the Lemures or like the police, their enemy.

The way she’d lived had been far from ordinary, and she’d never met people like them before.

It was true that they were delinquents.

They engaged in some illegal activities—they even attempted train robberies.

Strangely, though, she couldn’t sense anything shady about them. Sordid jealousy, animosity, and the cunning to kick others down for the sake of personal ambition had been perfectly ordinary within the ranks of the Lemures, but she hadn’t noticed anything of the sort here. But everyone had those feelings, didn’t they?

She didn't know why that was the case. She didn't even know whether the absence of those feelings was good.

Regardless of the answer, she was assailed over and over by the sense that something inside her was wavering.

If this kept up, would she break?

The world that belonged to her and her father alone, one that held only happiness—would it break?

As Chané considered this, she'd gradually grown afraid, and she'd even considered fleeing to some faraway location. Ever since her father had been sent to Alcatraz, she'd thought of turning herself in to the police, confessing all her own crimes, and getting herself sent there as well.

Do they even lock up women in Alcatraz?

As she walked through town, consumed by anxiety, she realized that a car was driving toward her.

Instantly growing wary, she sharpened her senses, scanning the air around her.

The car's approach was oddly slow, and her instincts alerted her to danger.

Why couldn't I do this earlier?

A thought that didn't matter at all flickered through her mind, but she snuffed it out promptly, focusing on the car in front of her.

As she glared at it, her eyes were clearly guarded, but the car drove straight ahead and came to a stop on the shoulder of the road a little ahead of Chané's group.

"Huh? What's up?"

The delinquents seemed to have picked up on the unsettling tension as well. The handful who were walking with Chané glanced at the suspicious car.

As they watched, its shiny black door opened.

The man who emerged looked more like the guy who'd built the car than the one who owned it.

He was dressed in bright-blue coveralls, and the enormous wrench he held was as long as a human arm.

When they saw his approach and the blotches of a dark-red substance along the silver object that dangled from his hand, the delinquents immediately reacted with anxiety.

As the man sauntered over, his wrench slung over one shoulder, he began to speak like an automaton.

"A sad story... Let's get started on a sad story."

"...!"

The man's behavior was clearly abnormal, and the delinquents exchanged confused expressions.

For her part, Chané picked up on something incredibly dangerous

about him.

His tone and attitude were casual, but he was watching them with eyes that were fully alert.

He looks like...him.

As she realized he reminded her of the man she'd fought to the death just the other day, her caution spiked.

Like the man on top of the train... That killer in the white suit!

Even though an attack from him wouldn't be a surprise anymore, the man kept walking toward Chané—

And then he tossed another incongruous remark in her direction.

"It's a story that's fit to make your heart burst with sadness...but, well, I'm having fun, so don't worry about that."



A few minutes later

"Jacuzzi! Jacuzzi!" shouted one of Jacuzzi's friends who'd returned short of breath and grabbed him by the collar.

"Wha...? Wh-wh-what happened?! What's got you all worked up?!"

"Never mind, just listen! It's real bad! Chané... Chané got snatched!"

"Huh?! Wh-what do you mean?! B-by the police?!"

Jacuzzi was imagining the worst-case scenario—that Chané had been arrested—but the answer he got back actually topped it.

"You think a cop would be walking around with an adjustable wrench?! It's him! The boss of the local gang of hoods—that punk Graham!"

"What?! Wh-what do you mean?!"

"Dammit... I don't even know what he did to us! He swung that wrench around, and then somehow we were all on the ground... The next thing I knew, they had Chané in the car already... And the bastard left this letter!"

Explaining the situation tersely, the delinquent shoved a piece of paper at Jacuzzi.

The words on it, which were written in an orderly hand, simultaneously clarified both what the kidnapper wanted and what they needed to do.

Dear Jacuzzi Spot: We have Eve Genoard. If you want her back safely, bring all the money you can pull together to the abandoned factory

on Lot 13 at the port. Come alone, of course.

That was all of it.

Clearly the abductor had mistaken Chané for the owner of the mansion where they were living.

He probably wouldn't believe that, though. Not only that, but he knew Jacuzzi's name. He probably knew the group couldn't run to the cops.

What would happen if he didn't bring the money? This wrench guy must have felt it was obvious enough that he didn't need to spell it out, and the blood drained from Jacuzzi's face.

Nice tensed. "What are we going to do, Jacuzzi?!"

Even though he was trembling like a leaf, the tattooed boy spoke without hesitation. "What do you mean? I'm going, obviously! ...I mean, I have to, don't I?!"

His determined yell echoed briefly.

He tottered back to lean against the wall, gripping the threatening letter in his hand weakly, crumpling it.

"...I-I-I'm scared silly, but still, I gotta..."



While Jacuzzi was panicking, another man was attempting to calmly judge the situation.

He had watched Chané's abduction play out from a crowded corner on Millionaires' Row. Now, the man pressed his fingers to his temples and began talking to himself.

"So that dress I sent her... She was wearing it. I never dreamed she'd put it on this quickly... Aww, I'm over the moon, but..."

For a guy who was talking to himself, he was speaking far too affectedly. However, he did have some questions, and he'd been worrying about what he should do next. He didn't often worry.

"Who was the guy in blue who got out of the car? Should I go after them?"

The mystery man who'd emerged from the vehicle had carried off the object of his affections.

Since they weren't actually going out yet, any normal man would probably have been torn between hesitating in fear and screwing up his courage to run to her aid.

But he wasn't normal.

The enormous wrench hadn't scared him, and if he'd wanted to save her, he might have been able to catch up to that car on foot.

He understood Chané to a certain extent—possibly even better than the Lemures had. For that very reason, he'd noticed what she was

doing, and it had made him hesitate to pursue them.

“Why did Chané let them take her away so easily?”

Interlude Tips—The Immortals

January 1932 Jane Doe, an underground tavern

The speakeasy, whose name meant “an unidentifiable woman,” was rather spacious.

There were lots of seats, but almost no customers.

This was only natural; this particular underground tavern was literally underground, and the land above it was occupied by one of New York’s graveyards.

The spooky décor—to match the graveyard—made it even harder to attract customers, and calling it a vampire’s lair would have sounded convincing.

The place’s black-clad owner had countless scars running across his face, and he proudly displayed a shotgun and an enormous machete behind him to discourage would-be robbers.

Most of the few existing customers seemed to feel as if they’d come to the wrong place. The rest were all as creepy as the owner.

One of the seats was currently occupied by a man who belonged to the “shouldn’t have come here” set.

He was a young guy with distinctive black hair that was slicked back, and he looked quiet and well-behaved.

A cool-faced reporter was sitting across the table from him. On his chest, he wore a badge from one of New York’s small newspapers, but he didn’t seem to be interviewing the other man for an article. He seemed to be listening out of personal interest.

The table stayed silent for a while, but when a gloomy waitress brought over their drinks and some jerky, the slender young man began to sullenly speak.

His tone was rougher than one would expect from his appearance, but from the way he talked, even an amateur would have known that he was bluffing.

He was describing the incident he’d experienced on the Flying Pussyfoot half a month earlier...

Upham's Story

How far did I get yesterday?

...Oh, right.

Up to the part where I got nabbed by those delinquents.

I boarded the Flying Pussyfoot as a member of that group in black. I was helping with their terrorism.

Then a screwy group of young punks grabbed me...

Technically, I should be in jail—and if my luck was any worse, I'd be pushing up daisies.

...No, I guess it's not about bad luck.

Even with ordinary luck, I probably would have been dead.

I think my luck was really good.

I didn't get turned into hamburger by that nutjob in the white suit or the monster in red, and I even gave the cops the slip.

...

Don't get the wrong idea. It's not because I was ultra-committed.

When Nader asked me to flip, I hesitated.

I did want to get closer to Master Huey's immortality; that was part of it. Honestly, though, I didn't think Nader and the rest would believe me if I told them about it... Actually, I was surprised a journo like you knew about Master Huey at all... I'm assuming that means you're not a cop setting me up. That's the only reason I agreed to this interview.

Well, while I was hesitating, I just happened to hear some other guy go to Goose and snitch on Nader. I followed his lead, sang to Goose myself so I wouldn't get snuffed out as a traitor. That's all it was.

Guys like me can't do anything special.

I wanted Master Huey's immortality, too, but not enough to risk my life over it.

I'm not cut out for that sort of thing.

After what happened then, I'm sure of it.

The talk about immortals had absolutely nothing to do with me.

...I know they exist. I've seen Master Huey regenerate.

Still, even if it is true, it's a fairy tale.

A guy like me wasn't allowed to set foot in that world.

Even if I ended up over there, I'm not confident that I'd drink the elixir. I mean, there ain't much point in having an immortal body if your mind dies.

Oh, right. Like I said, I was forced to see something.

...By the two immortals who were on that train.

...Two of 'em.

That's right. There were at least two immortals on board—they were like Master Huey.

After that tattooed kid and the big Mexican lug grabbed me, they made me cough up everything about the Lemures' objectives, tied me up, and slung me into a freight car.

Oh, it's all over. I'm gonna die here.

I was just about to start crying—pathetic, I know—and then...

...along came *that* guy.

...What was he like?

Let's see. He didn't have any distinguishing features to speak of, and he was kinda plain, but...

Oh, right.

His smile.

I remember that mild smile perfectly.

No matter what happened to him...the guy never, ever stopped smiling.

And then, every chance he got, he'd tell me the same thing:

"Smile."

If I had to sum him up, well...

...I guess I'd call him a *smile junkie*.



Millionaires' Row

While the man was telling his story under the graveyard—

Immediately after Jacuzzi had headed for the warehouse, Nice and the others who'd been left behind were glumly gathered on the street.

"What do we do, Miz Nice?"

"Nothing... We'll just have to believe in Jacuzzi."

Nice was hanging her head, her fists clenched, but the delinquents understood.

If they took their eyes off her, she was bound to grab a ton of bombs, go after Jacuzzi, and blow up everything she saw without caring who saw it.

She was the one who most wanted to stop Jacuzzi, and she was also the one who'd most wanted to respect his wishes and let him go alone.

"Shouldn't we have stopped him? Roughed him up if we had to?"

"With his injuries, he'd die if we did that."

"Once Jacuzzi's like that, he don't stop."

"It's already been 129 seconds. If we're going, we'll have to do it soon, or else..."

"Besides, if we'd stubbornly gone with him anyway, Chané would..."

"Yeah, there's no telling what that fella with the wrench might pull."

"It's still better'n not going!" "But Jacuzzi told us not to follow him."

"Like I care?!" "Hya-haah!"

As the ruckus continued, a voice that was perfectly relaxed abruptly spoke to Nick. "Say, let me take a look at that letter."

"? Yeah, sure. Here."

"Hmm... I see. 'Come alone'... Hmm," said the young man as he checked the letter. "I have an idea. How about this?"

And he made a suggestion.

"

With that, the young man vanished down Millionaires' Row.

"Thanks, buddy!" "Hya-hoo!" "Hyah-hoo."

The group watched the young man go—and then somebody muttered:

"...By the way, who was that guy?"

"Huh? Wasn't he a friend of yours?"

"Uh, no. What about you, Nice?"

"No, I assumed he was an acquaintance of Nick's or Jack's..."

"Never seen the guy before."

"Oh, him. I'm pretty sure he's looking for somebody around here. I heard he was trying to hunt up this old guy, Quates or Quartz or somebody. He sounds like a real busybody, though. Rumor has it he'll stick his nose in whenever he thinks someone's in trouble."

"Do you think we looked like we were in trouble?"

"Whoa, and here we just assumed he was a fakeloo artist or something." "That wasn't real nice of us."

"Shouldn't we go tell him thanks?" "Hya-haah?" "Hya-haw!"

"Mgh. Have to hurry, Jacuzzi's in danger."

When Donny muttered again, the kids decided that they would keep the issue of that stranger for later.

"Well, for now, let's go with his idea! We'll be able to stroll in and save Jacuzzi this way!"



Upham's Story

...Anyway, that guy was an odd one.

I, uh... The second the ropes came off...I put my knife to his throat. I didn't know what he was after, you know?

I mean, it was weird! Walking around wearing a dopey smile on a train full of corpses and untying me when I was obviously up to no good...

I thought maybe he was the red monster, and I...I was scared out of my skull.

But, but he...

He pushed his own throat into the knife.

Can you believe that?

His blood sprayed out right in front of me, bright red...

...

Well, you already know what happened after that, right?

Since you know what immortals are and all.

Yeah, his body did the same thing Master Huey's did.

The blood turned into this thing, like a swarm of thousands, millions of red ticks... They surged up, crawling over our clothes and skin, heading back to the gaping wound my knife had made in him. It was incredible—disturbing. It was the second time I'd seen that happen after Master Huey, but you could show me the sight a hundred times and I don't think I'd ever get used to it.

I saw it again right after that, and it got to me then, too.

I was also wounded and confused that second time, so that might have been part of it.

Yeah, that's right. It's hidden under my clothes, but I got stabbed in the arm a little.

It's better than getting ground into hamburger meat by that red monster or having my head blown off by that white suit.

...You wanna know what happened?

The smiling immortal didn't get me or anything.

I told you, remember? There was another immortal on that train.

And that other one was...

...

...

...I'm not sure how to explain it.

Maybe this is too abstract, but...

Okay. Say somebody walks into this place, pulls out a Chicago Typewriters and fills us all full of daylight. Just imagine it for a second.

You've got no idea why he's doing it, but he's trying to butcher everyone in the place. He starts with whoever twitches first and doesn't stop until he's hit us all. He's twisted, wrong in the head.

Now, as another example, say there's a guy standing behind that dangerous lead-slinger.

The shooter's trying to kill everybody, but he doesn't turn around to the guy behind him.

No, they're not friends or partners. But the guy in the back has just been enjoying the show, confident he's absolutely safe, even though he ain't safe at all so close to a murder.

He's... a spectator.

Yeah, a spectator. That guy's the audience.

We're living real lives, playing for keeps, but to that guy,

everything that happens to us might as well be happening onstage.

The shooter swings that gun around all he likes, but the slugs are never gonna reach the audience.

But this spectator tries to get involved in the story anyway.

You ever watch a musical? You know how there's always that one guy who talks real loud, making everybody listen to his opinion whether they want to or not? *That's a good play, that one's a bomb, I woulda done it this way*, et cetera.

This guy's quiet, but his voice goes a long way. It always gets where he wants it to go.

It travels from one place to the next, on and on, reaches the players and the director, and starts cutting off their options before they even notice.

That's how he manipulates the play from the safety of the audience. He's trying to make the show he wants to watch.

It's not as directly impactful as being the scriptwriter. He's fine with being the only spectator. He never thinks about anybody else.

And going back to the first example... Once the lead-slinger's finished massacring everybody, he hears a whisper in his ear.

"Didn't you miss one?" the guy behind him says. *"What about you?"*

...That second immortal made my skin crawl.

I didn't spend a long time with him or anything. Just a few minutes, tops.

When I say he got me during that interval, though, I mean he stabbed me and almost killed me.

...Yeah, that's right.

That creepy bastard shanked me.

It happened when I went to the conductors' room with the other immortal, the smile junkie.

I went along because I wanted to get to the bottom of what was happening—

—but what we saw in there were a couple of useless meat paperweights that used to be the conductors.

"Hmm. What do you suppose happened? One's been shot, and the other was...eaten by a dragon from the looks of it. And it took off half his body in one bite. There were several corpses like this one in the freight rooms on the way here. What is all this?"

"...Th...that's what I wanna know."

"I wonder if these people had families. How should we break this to them...? How can we help their loved ones recover from their deaths as

quickly as possible?"

He and I were having a conversation right there, in front of two corpses. It didn't feel real, the stuff he was saying.

I tell you, his head wasn't quite screwed on right.

Well, that aside... I was staring at those corpses and worrying about Miss Chané, and then...

...Huh?

C'mon, Miss Chané doesn't matter now.

Anyway, as I was brooding...

...I heard this voice from the door to the conductors' room, behind me:

"You're in the way."

That was all.

...

Just remembering that voice now gives me the heebie-jeebies.

It wasn't hateful.

It wasn't overpowering or demonic.

There wasn't any feeling like that in his voice.

...

Yeah.

There was nothing in his voice at all.

No malice, no goodwill. Perfectly neutral.

When I turned around, with no clue what was going on, there was a guy standing there.

And he was bringing a knife down on me.

So I got stabbed, but I also whipped out my knife and stabbed him back.

I tell you, that was a close call. I don't miss the Lemures, but who knows what would have happened if I hadn't had that training...

Anyway, I ran him right through the heart, but...you know the rest, right?

I saw it again.

Just like the smiley fella, the blood spray turned into red bugs that went back home to their nest.

Apparently, those immortals knew each other.

They talked about a few things, but I couldn't follow any of it.

Master Huey's name came up and so did the names of other people who seemed to be their buddies, but...

Yeah, I couldn't follow it.

After that, the second immortal almost killed me.

Yeah, just a few minutes after we met.

All he'd done was stab me.

But...I knew.

I knew we lived in different worlds.

For example, say you were reading *Peter Pan*, and Captain Hook started taking swings at you with that hook of his. He'd never hit you, yeah? It was like that. I was the Captain Hook in the book. He was like some snot-nosed brat who was reading me and laughing. I was sure of it.

Like I said before, he's in another whole dimension.

So. If you don't like Captain Hook, what do you do?

Usually, you just close the book, but what if the reader is an arrogant little brat?

Well, he'll tear out the pages about Captain Hook.

Oh, I'm gonna get torn.

When that second immortal lunged at me with his knife, I didn't think through that whole song and dance about stories and spectators. I could feel it, though.

I guess you could say I was helpless. I was so scared I couldn't do a thing.

We lived in different worlds.

I sensed that from the very depths of my being, and it scared the hell out of me.

The smile junkie who'd saved me was about as scary as that second immortal. But...scary as he was, he saved me again. He saved a guy like me.

He got in front of me, and the knife disappeared into his gut, instead of mine.

Then he grabbed the other guy's arm...and, little by little, he edged toward the rear of the conductors' room.

The door was wide open.

You get it, right?

...That smile junkie dropped off the train and took the other fella down with him.

When that second immortal fell, I heard it.

The guy's lips twisted—I think he was really enjoying it—and he muttered...

"Someday, I'll make you pay for this."

I heard him; I know what he said.

I know he was talking to the smile junkie.

Even so...just remembering it is terrifying.

When that guy takes revenge, the smile junkie won't be his only target.

If he wanted to come after one single person, I bet that guy would break the whole world to do it. I dunno when I'm gonna get involved, but I won't be the only one. It'll be every person on the planet, you included.

...

Say, that's about enough, ain't it?

I don't have anything else to tell you, particularly not about those guys.

I've got a few thoughts about the immortal who smiled the whole time...but I'll keep those to myself. I shouldn't be talking about that stuff with a stranger, and whatever I think won't affect the facts at all.

And anyway...the guy told me to keep them a secret.

That's why even though I remember their names clearly, I can't tell you.

I've done some bad shit in my life, but I want to keep my promises halfway, at least.

Why halfway?

...Ordinarily, nobody would believe a crazy story like this one, right?

I don't have the guts to live out my days with a thing like that locked up inside me.

That's why I figured I'd at least tell it to an information broker like yourself.

Still, I never would've thought there was someone who'd want a wire on the immortals...

That said, if you let intel like this leak the wrong way, I bet you'll end up with trust issues on your hands.

I'm planning to settle here in town awhile, but as you know, my hands ain't exactly clean.

If we run into each other on the street later, we've never met, all right?

Okay, see you. The food at this place was pretty good.

I may turn into a regular.

After tomorrow, though, you don't know me. Got it?



With that, the young man who'd introduced himself as Upham left the underground tavern.

The man with the DD newspaper badge stayed at the table for a little while, drinking liquor.

After about ten minutes, he spoke toward the seat behind him—to the man who'd been sitting back to back with him.

"Uh... Is that enough, mister?"

"Yes, that's just fine."

The occupant of the other seat spoke to the man with the badge without turning around.

At that, the man exhaled deeply in apparent relief—

—and then he struck up a cheerful conversation with the other guy.

"So was that about what you were looking for, mister?"

"Yes, it seemed like a very natural conversation."

"Well, I'm much obliged to you for calling in an unknown actor like yours truly. I didn't get any of that stuff about immortals and such, but... Once you complete this script, I'd settle for a walk-on part, so please do get in touch with me again."

"Yes, gladly. Thanks to you, I'll be able to polish my work."

The man in the rear seemed to be smiling faintly.

The actor in the role of an information broker removed his badge and responded to his client with a fawning smile.

"Oh, I'm thrilled I was able to help you... You have some fascinating ideas. I've never heard of adding realism to a script by letting me and that kid improv off the original concept..."

The actor nodded, seeming impressed, but the supposed playwright didn't respond to his comment.

"Still, the man who played the role of the criminal made one mistake," he said, rather abruptly.

"Did he, now?"

"After he was stabbed by the second immortal, he didn't launch a counterattack."

"Huh?"

The counterfeit reporter looked perplexed.

The man who sat behind him still hadn't turned his way, and an indescribably inorganic atmosphere drifted around him. It made the actor feel strange, almost as if he was talking to a painting, but the large sum of money he'd received as an advance payment had paralyzed his ability to recognize that feeling as danger.

"He rolled around on the floor, pathetically. After that, the immortal noticed the smile junkie's presence, and the smile junkie took advantage of his momentary surprise and stabbed him. That's the

truth of it... Or rather, that was the scenario, but he is just starting out as an actor, you know, and I expect he wanted to embellish his role to make himself look better.”

“Oh, I see! Well, if he was a young actor, these things happen!”

“That aside, really, thank you very much. Let’s go someplace else, refresh ourselves mentally, and talk a bit more. I’d like to discuss an additional payment—and what will happen when this play is actually finished.”

On seeing his client begin to move, the false information broker hastily stood up as well.

“Yes sir, thank you ever so much! Oh... Uh, um... Sorry, mister, your name...?”

At that point, the actor realized the other’s name had slipped his mind.

He was sure he’d heard it several times, and yet he’d forgotten it. Why?

This struck him as strange, but he immediately thought better of it, deciding it was only natural.

After all, the man had practically nothing in the way of distinguishing features.

If he’d been forced to choose something, it would have been the way the man’s bangs completely hid his eyes, but the fact that his eyes never showed naturally faded the impression he made.

The man had said he was a Broadway playwright, and he smiled at the false information broker who’d forgotten his name, telling him not to worry about it.

“It’s Victor. Victor Talbot. Once again, it’s good to meet you.”

He recited that certain name in a brisk voice.



A few minutes later Somewhere in Manhattan

“Now, then...”

The “playwright” cracked his neck as he walked down the alley, accompanied by the fake information broker.

The sun was long set, and the surrounding foot traffic was sparse.

They were walking along that way, heading somewhere else, when—

—a lone figure blocked their path.

“Oh, 'scuse me, pops! Could you point me toward the warehouse district, please?!”

The individual who was standing in their way was a boy, a rough type.

He did say “please,” even if his manner of speech was a bit rough, and the false information broker responded to him.

“Hunh? The nearest warehouse district is down that street to your right, then straight ahead.”

“Thanks! I’m new around here, see! Thanks a ton!”

The delinquent expressed his gratitude simply, then dashed off.

“Dammit! Did they all go on ahead?!”

One of the men reacted to the boy’s yell.

“So something’s going on in the warehouse district...?”

The playwright watched the guy run off toward the warehouses, then murmured in a practically inaudible voice, like a mosquito’s whine:

“In that case, *I suppose I won’t use the river.*”

“Huh? What’d you say, mister?”

“No, I’m merely talking to myself. Let’s discuss the details at your apartment, then, shall we?” the playwright murmured with a breezy smile, and the fake information broker looked troubled.

“Huh? It’s, uh, it’s pretty messy in there, though.”

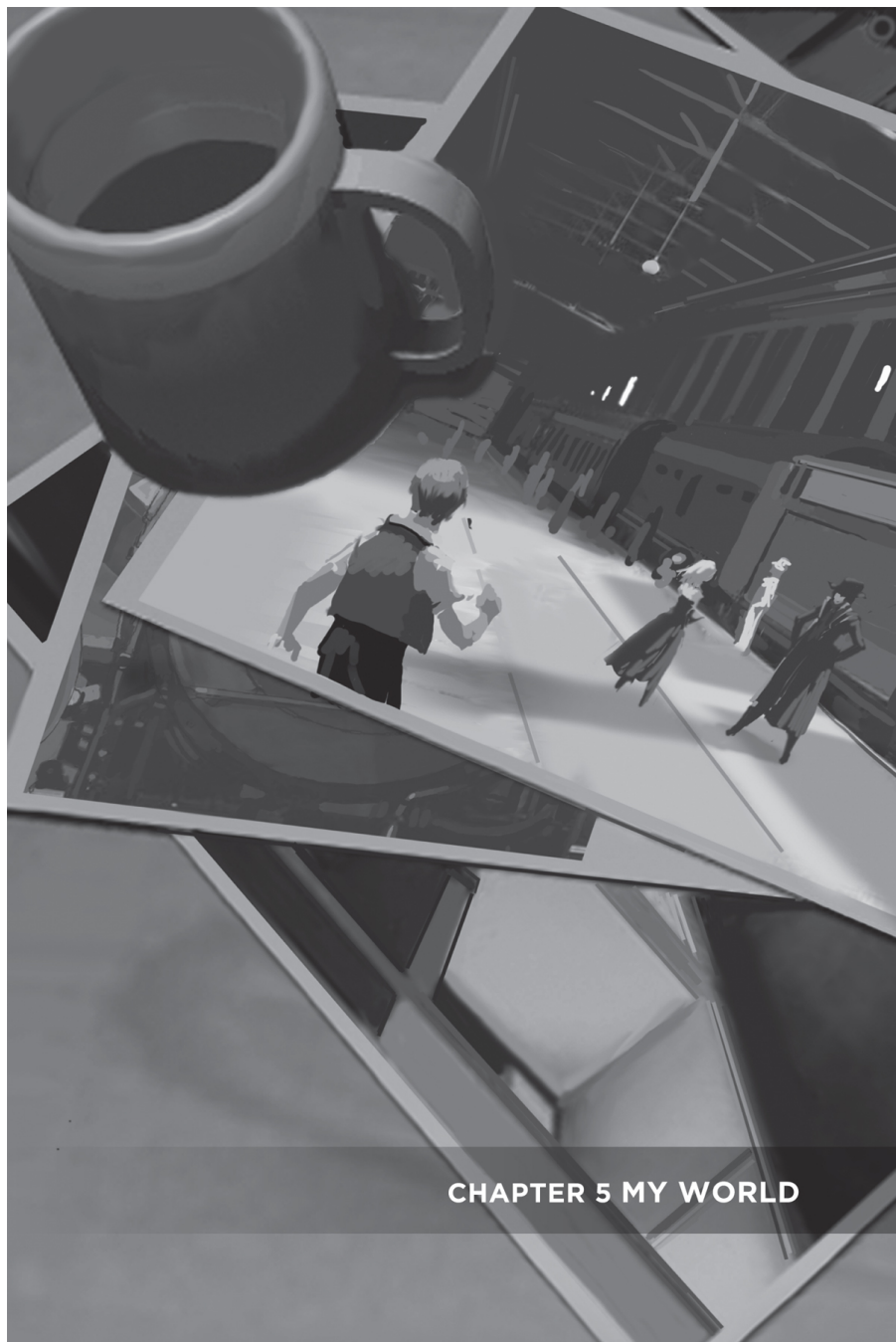
“It won’t bother me. In fact, it will be easier to talk of payment in a place that feels lived-in, won’t it?”

“...Well, yeah, you’re right about that! If I land a new job, I’ll be saying good-bye to my cramped little pad! Help me out, all right?”

“Ha-ha, it’s good to have dreams.”

The man smiled with a flattering reply, and the playwright’s lips quietly relaxed.

“Life is long, you see. If you have no dreams, you’ll soon tire of it...”



CHAPTER 5 MY WORLD

CHAPTER 5

MY WORLD

The abandoned factory

Night had fallen completely, shrouding the abandoned factory by the river, which Graham's gang was using as their hideout. The cold of winter and the dark of night heightened the atmosphere of decay, turning it into something even eerier.

In the center of that factory were a sizable number of suspicious shadows that were a good match for the gloomy atmosphere.

However, those figures surrounded a lovely girl in a white dress who didn't seem to belong in this place at all.

...This was true only as far as looks went, of course.

The large room was littered with machine components.

They'd made Chané sit in a corner on a rough chair cobbled together from pipes.

In front of her, a large heap of scrap wood was burning in an oil drum, and the bright, flickering flames redly illuminated the surrounding darkness.

The light revealed a man in coveralls, who seemed weirdly worked up for a guy with such dark eyes, and delinquents who seemed to be his companions.

"Poor doll. It looks like she's so scared she can't even talk. Heh-heh."

Even after that remark from the thug who'd been driving, Chané stayed silent.

She wasn't actually afraid, of course; she didn't allow herself to speak.

In order to keep the various secrets her father had taught her, Chané had voluntarily discarded her voice. She'd chosen not to learn sign language, and she communicated only what she absolutely had to in writing.

If she'd had a voice or known sign language, she might have confessed easily under torture or the influence of drugs, so first, she'd gotten rid of her words. In addition, by discarding conversation, she'd solidified the walls between herself and others.

She almost never communicated, even in writing. She used it only when there was something she wanted to say very badly.

At present, Chané was disgusted, and she had no intention of telling these people the truth.

She'd initially suspected they might have some connection to her father, and she'd pretended to let herself be kidnapped without a fuss in order to determine their objective—but when she listened carefully to their conversation, it turned out to be nothing at all. Apparently, they'd merely mistaken her for a girl named Eve.

“Sorry, little lady. Still, in a way, not being able to talk is lucky. When people talk, whether they're expressing sadness or joy or anger, they expend some intense energy. With fear or pain, it's even worse.”

The man was messing with an industrial tool, flipping it around. From the behavior of others around, Chané assumed he was the center of this group.

“In that sense, being so scared your words up and vanish on you is... Well, in a way, could you call it human instincts at work, a self-defense mechanism, there to conserve energy in extreme situations? Whoops. I said something kinda clever. Okay, fellas, bring on the praise.”

At his signal, the delinquents applauded, expressionless.

Clapping with total disillusionment, Shaft muttered indifferently.

“That last half killed the whole line. Not that it wasn't a birdbrained comment to begin with.”

“You really do have serious balls now, huh, fella. Good to hear. I guess that means that sticking a wrench in your gut was worth it. You're gonna pay for that later, though.”

Thinking that the delinquents' conversation was ridiculous, Chané decided it would be pointless to stay here any longer, and she slowly got up from her chair. They must have thought she was a sheltered, powerless girl: They hadn't tied her up, and they hadn't patted her down.

“Hmm? Hey, who said you could get up...?”

Still, they didn't even notice the weapons on my back... How amateurish are these men?

By now, she was certain they held no connection to her father. With that thought, Chané whipped out one of the knives she'd been wearing on her back.

“Waugh?!”

At the sudden flash of silver, a nearby delinquent screamed.

Meanwhile, the man in coveralls was startled, too— But from his expression, it seemed more as if he was enjoying an accident he hadn't seen coming.

“Oho... I thought you were just a rich young doll, but that's real

interesting. Is that for self-defense...? It's a little big. Not that I mind. You startled me a little, but that's a good thing. Surprise constantly reminds people that the future lies in impenetrable darkness—"

Without letting the man finish talking, Chané launched herself into a run, keeping her body low to the ground.

Closing the distance between them in the space of a breath, Chané's thin arm snapped out as if it was spring-loaded, and her knife streaked toward the man's arm.

What the man had done to Jacuzzi's friends a minute ago had been really slick. He'd used that enormous wrench to trap all their legs and dropped them soundlessly to the ground. They hadn't seemed to take any significant damage, but that was only because he hadn't launched a follow-up attack.

His foundation is his skill with a wrench.

That was the conclusion Chané had reached.

She'd decided that taking his arm out would be enough to let her get away, but—

Seconds before her blade reached him, there was a fierce metallic *clank*, and the knife stopped moving.

—!

"Surprise number two... Are you maybe not actually Eve Genoard? I mean, what you just did, that ain't how amateurs move. Uh, you really startled me, actually. Also, I'd appreciate it you'd listen to people until they're done talking."

Chané's sharp kinetic vision instantly understood what had happened.

His right hand had shifted the wrench so that it guarded the area from his heart to his neck, and in his left hand—although there was no telling when he'd taken them out—he held a pair of industrial pliers. The pliers were shut tight, firmly trapping Chané's knife.

She'd been holding back so that she wouldn't kill him, but she was surprised that he'd managed to stop her knife.

Even then, her expression hardly changed at all. As he watched her face, the man in coveralls began to cackle.

"You're a funny one. You're so okay you're too okay. Man, this ain't good; I'm getting all worked up. Okay, I made up my mind: Nothing will faze me now, even if somebody tells me you're a Martian. C'mon, hurry up and grow eight arms, wouldja? If you ain't human—that means you're worth breaking."

I knew it. This guy... He's like that man in the white suit.

From the things he says, to the way he plans to kill me!

Having decided that her opponent was dangerous, Chané began to take this seriously, even if it meant she had to take his life.

She launched herself off the ground, kicking the man's thigh.

She'd meant to use the recoil to tear her knife free from the pliers—but the guy in coveralls seemed to have read her intentions.

He flicked the huge wrench over to the spot where she'd aimed her kick, trapping her leg in its grip.

There was no pain. But she could feel her momentum being redirected—and the next thing she knew, her body was rotating in midair.

The knife had been torn from her hand, and it bounced and rolled on the ground with a dry metallic *clang*.

I messed up.

The hyperactive way he spoke and acted.

The malice that reminded her of that man in the white suit.

And the enormous weapon he held.

Working from those conditions, Chané had unconsciously tried to fight him in the same way she'd fought Ladd. In practice, though, Ladd was the type who bulled his way through by brute force—while this man fought by diverting his opponent's strength.

Even though she'd made that call herself just a moment ago, since she'd been thinking of him as Ladd Russo, she'd taken the wrong approach.

Feeling irritated at her own carelessness, Chané rapidly put some distance between them.

I still have one knife on my back.

If she managed to capitalize on a vulnerability, this would work out. The problem was, how should she go about creating that vulnerability?

Even as Chané thought, the man in coveralls calmly walked toward her.

"This is getting kinda fun. Really, really, really fun. Why don't we join forces here to tell a fun story? Specifically, well, you know what I mean—you losing."

What he said sounded crazy, but the way the man moved wasn't giving her any openings.

In the moment her psyched-up opponent raised that huge wrench, Chané decided that now was her chance and tried to launch herself at him, but—

—their tension was shattered by the entrance of a guy who didn't exactly belong here.

"Pl-please stop!"

A near-scream echoed in the factory and brought them to a halt.

Naturally, it hadn't come from Chané. It had sounded from a short distance away, near the center of the factory—and it belonged to a

spineless delinquent.

“U-um... I brought the money, so please let that girl go, right now!”

Even as he shivered, determination blazed in his eyes, and Jacuzzi Splot slowly walked toward Graham’s group. That said, both his legs needed an assist from the crutches he was using, and each step seemed to take a lot of effort.

I never thought he’d actually come.

The thought crossed Chané’s mind, but come to think of it, this was the guy who’d come after her in spite of his injuries when she’d gone to retake her father. It wasn’t strange for him to show up now.

But what could he do?

Frankly, Chané still had doubts.

Suspicious that his group knew about her father, she had approached them in order to use them.

It was true that after she’d stayed with them for a while, her suspicions had faded, but they hadn’t vanished entirely. It was the last rift between Chané and Jacuzzi.

Over the next few minutes, that doubt would completely disappear.

“Ho-ho. That was fast. Okay, let’s switch from a surprising story to a story that’s happy for me. Well, that’s great. Money’s great. At least, everyone says it is... And watching people dance for joy over that money and be destroyed is the best thing ever.”

Without losing any momentum, Graham turned toward Jacuzzi, wearing a refreshing smile that didn’t suit his eyes. However, half of his attention stayed focused on Chané, and he didn’t give her any easy openings.

“Hold it. You said you brought money, but...your hands are completely empty.”



“Uh, well, I don’t have cash, but...I did bring something that will work as a substitute.”

“?”

Graham’s group turned suspicious eyes on him, and Jacuzzi, still frightened, went on.

“I—I don’t know if you’ll believe me, but...I’m...”

At that point, he broke off for a moment. He drew a deep breath, and the resolve building in his gut finally burst out.

“There’s this mafia outfit in Chicago—the Russo Family. They have a bounty on me.”

“?!”

“If you hand me over to them...they should give you lots of money.”

Silence.

Nobody had been expecting that remark.

They’d simply assumed that he’d come to retake Chané by force because he was broke. The wimpiness of the boy who’d turned up had been a shock all by itself, and now that boy was putting his life on the line.

Graham’s gang’s second objective had been Jacuzzi all along. They’d practically conducted the kidnapping in order to get ahold of him—but they’d never imagined that he’d bring the matter up himself before they could confront him with it.

Naturally, Chané hadn’t been expecting Jacuzzi to say that, either. She knew he was wanted in Chicago; she’d heard that much from his friends. But she’d never dreamed that he’d use himself as a bargaining tool.

Why? To save...me?

If he was using her and her father for his own self-interest, then he wouldn’t throw his life away on this deal, plain and simple.

For my sake? Why...? It hasn’t even been that long since we met. I’m not his family or anything like it, so why...?

For a moment, a thought rose inside her.

She saw the smiles of Jacuzzi and his friends, and she felt an emotion she couldn’t allow herself to have.

That she wouldn’t regret being used, as long as they were the ones who did it.

“Ha-ha! ...Sheesh. Mr. Graham, this guy’s a total idiot! He doesn’t

even know what we're actually after, and he— *Gblagh!*”

Before his underling could laugh at Jacuzzi's ridiculous proposal, Graham jabbed his wrench into the man's gut and opened his dull eyes wide. He was stunned.

“You're a real piece of work.”

As everyone around them watched, Graham flung his wrench high in the air.

He snatched the iron tool out of midair as it came back down, sending a pleasant *smack* echoing through the factory.

“Dammit... You've impressed me. Interesting. You're fun. And you're sad, Jacuzzi Splot. But I'm impressed. They say fun and sadness are always two sides of the same coin, but...you! Right now! This very instant! My heart is trapped inside a stupid coin because of you!”

Yelling like a lunatic poet, Graham smacked the wrench again.

“Fine. Since you impressed me, I'll let this doll walk... She ain't Eve Genoard anyway, right? Besides, even if we let her go, with a limp like yours, I'm betting you won't be able to make a break for it. Frankly, I'm surprised you managed to walk this far. You're a tough guy.”

“No, I-I'm not... It hurts, and I'm scared, and I think I'm gonna cry.”

“You're tough and pathetic... Damn, fella, are you trying to trap me inside a coin again?”

Acting cheerfully irritated, Graham turned to face Chané.

“Go on, get outta here. You'd better thank that guy.”

In response, the hostage...made no attempt to move.

Instead, she was watching everything Graham did, and her eyes were even sharper than they had been before.

“...Hmm? What's up? ...Are you telling me we're not done fighting?”

Chané's resolve to kill him hadn't so much as flickered. Smiling wryly, Graham leveled his adjustable wrench again.

“Y'know, I was half hoping you'd stick around.”

“Ch-Chané...!”

As she listened to Jacuzzi's voice, Chané had quietly made up her mind.

She didn't understand what was making her want to do this.

But if she took this man down here, Jacuzzi would live. That was all she knew.

Chané quietly focused her mind.

The boundary line that separated life and death.

That line turned into a warped membrane that enveloped Chané and Graham, compressing the thick atmosphere inside it.

Once again, the situation in the factory was growing tense, but—
—the next instant, although it had been stretched to the breaking point, the feeling of tension abruptly dissipated.

A small-scale explosion had punched through the factory wall.

Red light welled up at the edge of Jacuzzi's vision, and part of the factory wall promptly flew to pieces with a loud crash.

"Eep?!"

Naturally, Jacuzzi hadn't been the only one startled; almost everyone in the place turned to look at the source of the roar. Graham and Chané both took this as a good opportunity, but because they'd both thought it, neither gave the other any openings, and their fight stayed deadlocked.

The flames disappeared almost instantly, and into the space where black-and-white smoke mingled came—

"Chané! Are you okay?!"

"Uh... Nice, the door was open. Why blow it up?"

"C'mon, Donny, you already know the answer to that one. Miz Nice just wanted to blow it up. Obviously."

"...If anyone reports that explosion, the police will be here soon! You should run!"

"What, you were actually thinking this through?!"

"Sounds like an afterthought to me."

"Besides, if you were planning to call the cops, reporting it normally would have been a better move..."

"Aren't you the first one they'd grab, Miz Nice?"

"It's all right. According to my calculations, it will be another 623 seconds before the police get here, at the very least."

"Hey, Melody, how'd you get those numbers?"

"I just know."

"Oh, you do, huh?!" "If you're so sure, then why'd you say 'at the very least?!'"

"Apologize!" "Why?" "Melody has a duty to apologize to me! The world should apologize to me." "What makes you so sure?" "I just know." "This again?!" "Man, instinct makes for a handy excuse!" "Instinct takes all the blame, doesn't it?!" "Yeah, you should apologize to it!" "I'm sorry." "Wait, you actually did it...?!"

"Hya-haah!"

"Hya-haw!"

Jacuzzi's friends stepped into the factory, bringing an incomprehensible din along with them.

The several dozen delinquents who'd made such a raucous entrance threw the thugs in the factory into clear confusion.

Graham kept his cool, but he turned to a mystified Jacuzzi.

“...Huh? Didn’t I write for you to come alone in that letter?”

“H-he’s right, you guys! Why are you here?! I told you over and over not to...!”

Jacuzzi also protested, but Nice was perfectly unbothered as she answered.

“Yes, as it said in the letter, you went alone, Jacuzzi, and so—

“I also came here alone.”

“I walked here by myself.”

“Me too.”

“Me three.”

“Get this: Me too!”

“Uh, I came myself. From Mexico to America.”

“I’m on my own, too.”

“In life, you’re always alone. Don’t expect help!”

“Ultimately, everybody’s alone, you know.”

“I also came on my own.”

“Sorry, I actually came with my little sister... I could’ve sworn I did!”

“Look, I told you, you ain’t got a little sister.”

“So I guess his delusions walked here all by themselves.”

“Chaini, you close your mouth and stick to saying hya-haah!”

“Hya-haah!” “Hya-haw.”

“Anyway, I came alone, too.”

“Me too.” “And me.” “Me as well.” “As did I.”

They all gave the same answer, and Graham thought back over what he’d written—

“Hey, there’s no contradiction there. You people... You must be pretty smart.”

“You’re just too dumb, boss! Wh-wh-what’re we gonna do about this?!” Shaft urged, now that he’d recovered from the pain of that jab to his stomach.

Graham didn’t turn a hair, and as he went on, his expression was filled with confidence.

“Relax. Did you forget we have a hostage?”

“She doesn’t even count as a hostage anymore!”

Graham looked at Chané, who was standing frozen, knife in hand. He fell to thinking, and then—

“Do you think they’d stop if we took you hostage instead, Shaft?”

“What the hell makes you think they would?!”

Blatantly ignoring his scream of protest, Graham mused, laid-back.

“Well, with numbers like this, I doubt we’ll have any trouble. If the other guys were all cars or something, I’d enjoy breaking them, but frankly, I’m not fond of destroying human joints...”

As he was muttering with perfect composure, a stir was running through Jacuzzi’s companions.

“...Hey. When all of you were talking just now...I heard a voice I didn’t recognize.”

“Oh, you thought so, too?”

“Hya-haw.”

“Uh, actually, he’s over there by the wall...”

“That redheaded fella... Who’s he?”

The delinquents’ gazes finally converged on one place, throwing the lone man who stood by the wall into sharp relief.

Jacuzzi and Nice also knew something was very different about this red-haired guy—

And Chané was already in motion.

“Ghk?! Dammit!”

Graham hadn’t been expecting Chané’s charge, and he’d involuntarily given her an opening.

I’ve gotta do something, or she’ll get me.

Instantly, he twisted away, trying to avoid a lethal injury—

—but Chané ignored him and *charged toward the redheaded man like a bullet.*

As the lovely cannonball’s blade was about to plunge into the guy’s throat—

—Chané’s knife stopped.

The man hadn’t done a thing.

The confusion that had welled up inside her had halted the blade.

Why did I stop?!

Why did I hesitate to kill this man?!

I knew the moment I saw his eyes: He’s the one from back then!

And yet my blade stopped. Why?!

It’s strange. I’m not myself today.

A moment ago...when I tried to save Jacuzzi— That made no sense, either.

This man... He’ll get in Father’s way. That’s what I’d decided...

No... Today, when he sent me clothes, I knew.

I’m trying to kill this man—because of my own ego.

I’m scared—afraid to let a new person into the world where Father and I live, the place for only the two of us.

I’m terrified that the past I believed in is going to break.

The red-haired man ignored Chané’s confusion. He didn’t try in

the slightest to take or evade the knife she held at his neck. Instead, he spoke with flushed cheeks.

“...We haven’t seen each other in a while, but I wanted to say this anyway...”

That voice unmistakably belonged to the Rail Tracer.

“It’s fine. If you’re planning on killing me, I don’t mind. I just figured I should tell you how I felt about you, at least once.”

What does he mean?

Don’t confuse me any more than this. Don’t send my heart off course.

“Up on that train, all the stuff I said was based on logic. I didn’t tell you how I *felt*.”

Stop it. Don’t say it.

“I’m gonna lay it out there... I’ve got a problem. It looks like I love you from the bottom of my heart, Chané... Sorry. I lied. This isn’t a problem for me at all. I do love you, though... Argh, I knew it, I’m no good with fancy words. Basically—I love you! Marry me!”

It was a pragmatic confession of love, totally lacking in romance.

Neither Jacuzzi, nor Nice, nor even Graham knew how they should react to this sudden intruder. However, from the fact that the man’s cheeks were a little flushed, they understood that even though the confession seemed like it had to be some kind of joke, he was serious.

Chané also understood the man was being honest.

Back when she’d been with the Lemures, there had been many men who’d casually tossed the word *love* at her, but she’d always known they didn’t mean it. After they’d learned more about who she was, none of them had spoken to her again.

This man is different, though.

I didn’t sense the slightest lie in the world he showed me on top of the train.

Oh, I’m scared.

At the same time, Chané was unable to sort out the emotions that churned inside her.

I’m terrified.

It was an issue more basic than deciding whether or not to fall in love with someone else.

I never knew...how terrifying it could be.

Regardless of the results, the act of sincerely accepting words that were colored by someone’s love was completely unknown territory for her.

I never knew someone besides Father could frighten me so.

“Are you scared?” Claire asked slowly, looking into Chané’s eyes.

Even though Jacuzzi and the others were around them, listening in, he spoke loudly and clearly, as though they were witnesses to his

vow.

"It'll be all right, I promise. I won't break the world you've always believed in. No matter what. If you believe in me—you're believing in my world. And I would never, ever break my own world."

As if he'd read Chané's mind, Claire made a declaration full of confidence.

"A world isn't that flimsy. It won't break just because somebody stepped inside."

It was like he was speaking to his own world to make sure he was understood.

"It just—gets a little bigger. That's all."

The young man checked in with his world, verifying that it was prepared to accept the world of this girl, Chané.

"If your world looks like it's going to break—I'll protect it."

He assured her again and again.

"Normally, you probably can't trust guys who make these kinds of promises, but..."

He assured her of his love, which could only reach those in his world.

"...as you know—I'm not normal."

Chané stared at the young man and his bashful smile, and the next thing she knew, she'd lowered her knife.

This man...and Jacuzzi's group...

To think the world she had avoided looking at until now, the world she'd never tried to see, had held such terrifying beings.

They punched right through the shell she'd desperately built up. They smiled and asked to shake her hand. What terrible creatures.

Yet, at this point, Chané strangely felt the same sort of emotion for these outsiders as she did for her father.

She didn't want to lose those who had stepped inside her shell.

Was that really love in the end? Even she didn't know.

After all, in her world, her father had never told her he loved her. Not even once.



A roar.

A shrill metallic noise echoed in the factory, yanking everyone back to their present circumstances.

Jacuzzi's group had no idea what had happened, but when they

turned toward the noise—there was Graham, perplexed.

“Uh, let me tell you an incomprehensible story. When it comes to incomprehensibility in the affairs of mankind— What is that? ...I’m lost. Well, whatever. Thinking about all this is pointless. And so, despite my confusion: Can we pick this thing back up where we left off?”

Graham had been completely abandoned, and he was seething.

“Sure. I’ll give you permission.”

The first one to respond was the one responsible for breaking up the tension in the first place: the man with the red hair.

“All right, well, I haven’t gotten an answer from Chané yet, but... if you’re fighting my beloved and her friends, I’ll take you on. So if you’re going to make a break for it, now’s your chance.”

The intruder’s words couldn’t have been more arrogant, and for a moment, Graham was taken aback, but before long, he heaved a big sigh.

“Before we do any fighting, my biggest and possibly truly pointless yet personal curiosity begs the question—who are you?”

“Me? My name is... I’m not telling you fellas my real name, but for now, I’ll introduce myself as Felix Walken.”

The moment the young man gave that name, Graham’s underlings’ expressions changed drastically.

“Huh?”

“Felix... Ain’t that...the name of that legendary hitman...?”

“That’s just a rumor...right?”

Ignoring his confused pals, Graham spoke calmly, wrench dangling. “Don’t panic. If this guy’s a legendary hitman, well, we know a legendary murderer, remember? You’ve watched my brother Ladd all this time, so it’s way too late to get jumpy over a name, ain’t that right?”

“Ladd the murderer?”

When he heard what Graham said, the redheaded man seemed to remember something.

“That’s the guy who fell off the train the other day, right?”

The air turned icy.

Graham’s friends all felt their mouths go dry.

They knew what the drop in temperature meant, and they backed up on instinct, putting more distance between themselves and Graham.

“...How come you know that? That story ain’t exactly a rumor walking around. Not outside his inner circle.”

It was a heavy, dark, sharp voice, the sort that would weaken the

soul of anyone who heard it.

But the red-haired guy answered casually.

“Well, I mean... I’m the one who dropped him.”

The next moment, a silver baton flew at the Rail Tracer, spinning unbelievably fast.

Everybody who saw it thought the same thing: *Oh. That redhead is dead.*

Yet, the young guy caught the massive wrench easily—then put an even greater spin on it and threw it back even faster.

The force made everybody think, *Oh. That guy in coveralls is dead*, but Graham also caught it as if it was nothing. He spun it the other way to kill its momentum, and turned his own body one hundred and eighty degrees.

He turned his back? Jacuzzi’s group wondered, but only for a moment.

Graham went through another half rotation, adding an extra three hundred and sixty degrees of force to the wrench, and hurled it back.

It was spinning even faster.

By now, the wrench resembled a silver disc.

The redheaded guy didn’t catch it that time. He dodged it by a hair—

—but immediately afterward, a blue figure was right in his face.

When Graham threw the wrench, he’d leaped after it.

He held a small wrench and pair of pliers in his hands in an almost comical two-handed fighting style as he bore down on his redheaded foe.

“Oho!” The Rail Tracer leaped back, mildly impressed.

A moment later, there was an explosion, but not from dynamite.

It was the sound of that enormous wrench destroying the oil drum that had been behind the redhead.

The empty steel container buckled, torn nearly in half at the point where the attack had hit.

If that had been a human, their upper and lower bodies might have been forced to part company.

As Jacuzzi imagined it, his vision dimmed. That didn’t stop the battle in front of him from intensifying, and he was too frazzled to pass out.

“Wow, that startled me. You’re better than I thought, fella,” the redhead commented. Even though he’d been dodging death in physical form constantly for the past couple of minutes, he was as carefree as ever. “You might actually be tougher than that guy Ladd.”

“You think so? That’s real nice to hear, but unfortunately, my

heart's too tough to fall for flattery!" Graham responded as he paid out random attacks with his tools.

His manner of speaking completely ignored the rhythm of his attacks. It was as if his mouth and his body were working separately. As a matter of fact, his barrage of attacks was based in the motions that his demolition work had physically ingrained in him. He was effectively balancing multiple tasks separately.

As the redhead dodged a barrage of unpredictable attacks with no clear trajectory, he smiled.

"Well, taunting always seemed to get his dander up, so I'd say you're stronger mentally."

"Applesauce. My brother Ladd always rises to provocation; it's a natural law. That natural law also says he's too strong a fighter, so he crushes all his opponents once he decides to get into the ring! There's no contradiction there! In other words, he's constantly saddled with the handicap of being easy to bait! He's a terrifying guy, my brother Ladd...! And I finally realized that what you just said was more of a taunt than flattery, but it's too late to get mad about it now. Am I all washed up or what?!"

"Don't ask me. Y'know, the way you talk is funny, too," he said with a laugh.

They sounded like two good buddies slinging banter at each other, but if you actually watched the two of them move, you could tell their relationship was nothing of the sort.

Graham took a step back from his opponent, picking up the huge wrench that had been lying on the ground—then shifted straight into taking a full-force, ground-scraping swing with it.

A metallic noise rang out, and something flew at the redhead's face.

It was the knife that Graham had ripped out of Chané's hand a moment ago.

The wrench had dexterously scooped up and sent the silver blade streaking toward the redhead, but he caught it as if it was nothing, flipped it around, and held it out hilt-first to Chané, who was standing behind him.

"Here. This is yours, right?"

"..."

The act was completely out of place in the middle of a fight, and Chané's eyes swam in confusion, but she took the knife.

In the next instant, the redhead seemed to vanish.

Graham had come in from the side and swung his wrench in a heavy downward strike, but his opponent dodged it just before it got there. Then, when the tool slammed into the floor, the young man used it as a stepping stool to reach Graham's shoulder.

He twisted around, grabbed a hook that was hanging from the ceiling, kicked off a nearby pillar, and used the chain to maneuver as if he was swimming through midair.

“You still wanna go?”

As he locked eyes with the foe above him, Graham shot him with more illogical statements.

“Hey, ginger. You’re not afraid of my wrench at all, are you? You’re not scared. You’re not frightened. You’re not spooked! How rude can you get?! I don’t expect you to apologize to me, but my wrench and the laws of physics are very offended!”

“True, I’m not scared, but bullets will kill you, and I’m used to slashing attacks after all my fights with Cookie.”

“Who’s Cookie?!”

“My pal. You’ve never heard of him?”

The red-haired man’s response was even less rational, and Graham lightly kicked a nearby oil drum into the air—

“Like hell I do! Introduce me later! I bet any pal that can fight with you is a monster, right?!”

He hit the oil drum he’d lofted with the wrench, sending it into the air like a baseball.

The redheaded man let go of the hook, landed neatly on top of that oil drum—and then touched down on the ground, warped iron barrel and all.

“Well, he was ten feet tall, easy.”

“So he is a monster!”

The redheaded young guy, who was standing on the oil drum as if it was a balancing ball, looked a little disappointed. Since it was warped, the oil drum made a weird *kee-clonk, kee-clonk* noise under him.

“I see. I’m not very famous, but he sure was. I don’t mind introducing you, but he hates the smell of iron, so he’d probably eat you.”

“Eat me?”

The conversation made no sense.

The two sides of their dialogue weren’t meshing at all, but the rhythm of their fight synchronized so well it was a thing of beauty.

The way they moved was so abnormal that Jacuzzi and the other spectators began to doubt reality, wondering whether this might be a dream.

After their exchange had gone on for a few minutes, Graham abruptly realized something.

His opponent still hadn’t launched a single decent counterattack.

...

I'm pushing him, so it's all he can do to dodge, and he can't counterattack.

...No, this guy's too good for that.

"So you dropped my brother Ladd off the train, huh...?"

They'd both taken some distance, and as they caught their breath, he gradually began to rein in his urge to destroy.

"That...looks like it wasn't a lie."

Lightly thumping the ground with his wrench, Graham quietly stared downward—

—and then he murmured, without letting anyone see his expression:

"...We're going home."

And that was all.

"Wha...? Huh? 'Scuse me?"

His delinquent friends were baffled, but Graham delivered a loud monologue to the factory, keeping his back turned on the redhead.

"Ahh... Let me tell you a sad, sad story."

Slinging his adjustable wrench over one shoulder, Graham sounded thoroughly despondent.

"An enemy I hate with a passion is right in front of me, and yet I can't even mess with him."

"You just spent the past several minutes mess— *Bwugh!*"

Lightly jabbing his smaller wrench into Shaft's stomach, Graham continued his speech.

"I mean, how could I? ...After all, someday...Ladd's gonna slaughter that guy himself. If I mess with him, I'll probably die a horrific, savage, atrocious death at Ladd's hands."

At that line, the redhead's face grew rather serious, and he spoke, casually respecting his opponent.

"...Thanks for the warning, buddy."

"It ain't a warning. It's a death sentence."

Spitting out that final remark, Graham walked right past Jacuzzi's group, heading for the door. Still perplexed, the other delinquents trailed after him.

As he passed Jacuzzi, Graham muttered to him in a low voice, "I like your style... Go ahead and use this warehouse whenever you want. It's mine."

"Huh...?"

"See ya. Let's meet again. Sometime when that damn ginger's not around."

As he watched Graham leave with a defeated smirk, Jacuzzi realized he couldn't make heads or tails of what had just happened.

"So...was he a good person? Or a bad one?"

"I don't think it matters either way. In the end, everyone's safe."

Jacuzzi had been talking to himself, but Nice answered him nonetheless.

Maybe he'd been relieved by how normal that was: Jacuzzi sank down to sit on the ground.

"I'm still confused, but...are we...safe now?"

"That's right, Jacuzzi... Still...that man... What is he?"

Nice was watching the guy who'd appeared like a sudden storm. He was facing Chané, and they were gazing into each other's eyes and talking about something.

That said, the red-haired man was doing all the talking.

Jacuzzi got the feeling he'd seen him somewhere before, but for now, he decided to end the conversation without pursuing the matter.

"I don't really get it...but maybe I don't need to. Let him be."

Looking at his friend, he gave a smile that seemed rather relieved.

"Besides...Chané seems happy. Just a little."



"I'll tell you, and only you, my real name, Chané. I'll let you keep it for me. It's the name of my soul. That—is my vow."

As he gazed at Chané with an earnest expression, the redheaded man sounded almost as if he was making a joke.

"It's Claire... Claire Stanfield."

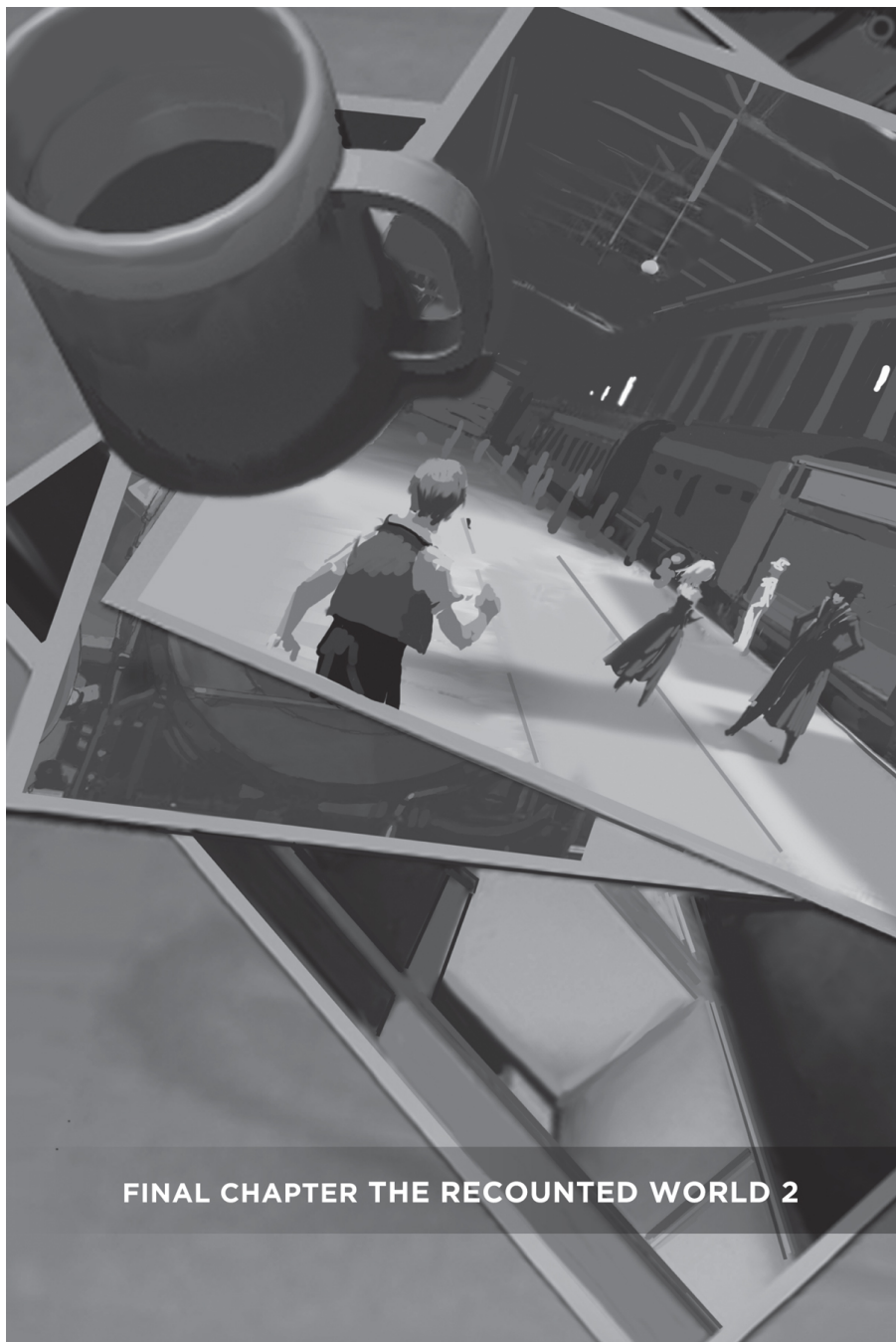
He seemed a little embarrassed by his own formal introduction, but he asked her one more question.

"If you don't mind—we can start as friends. Would you...fall in love with me?"

Wordlessly, Chané averted her eyes. However, her cheeks flushed very faintly crimson.

And that—was her answer.





FINAL CHAPTER THE RECOUNTED WORLD 2

FINAL CHAPTER

THE RECOUNTED WORLD 2

A first-class train compartment on the continental railway

Smack, smack.

The first-class compartment was filled with the sounds.

As if fitting his words to that rhythm, the information broker stated the conclusion in a matter-of-fact way.

“Two years after that...Graham’s faction did well, but unlike Jacuzzi and the others, they caused too much trouble in the territory of a major mafia syndicate, which gradually began to mark them. Then, just when they needed it, they were contacted by an outfit with which they had an erstwhile connection: the Russo Family...”

The vice president, who had a gun concealed in his jacket, narrowed his sharp eyes and delivered his wares to his customer with perfect composure.

It was as if he was slowly engraving information, that formless product, into the other man’s brain.

“The Chicago-bound train they boarded had a slight problem with its security. After a certain point in time...if a robbery were to occur in the first-class compartments, it wouldn’t be discovered until the train reached the station. In a move to boost morale, their leader—no doubt inspired by the actions of Ladd Russo, a murderer whom he loves and respects—is considering attacking this train... In addition, I believe he’s heard a rumor to the effect that the occupants of first-class compartments are affluent individuals who are unpopular with the world at large. Well, I believed that the probability of his actually committing the deed was low, but I prepared an origami popgun just in case. Then, when I heard the sound of someone running in the corridor, I was convinced.”

Beside the vice president, the girl photographer’s clasped hands were trembling.

She knew that the man who sat in front of them wasn’t the sort of problem that could be solved with a single pistol.

However, the one wielding that pistol was the vice president, a man who’d instantly knocked out three intruders a moment ago, singlehandedly. She couldn’t even imagine how this situation would

play out, but either way, if she got pulled into it, her life would be in an extremely precarious position.

Once she was sure that the vice president had finished his tale, Carol timidly turned her eyes to the man in coveralls who was sitting across from them—Graham Specter.

Unlike those of her boss, who was sitting beside her, Graham's eyes weren't sharp and piercing. Instead, they were heavy-lidded, as if he was half-asleep; they were also so very dark and dull. There was a weighty, disquieting pressure in them that seemed liable to crush everything.

As silence fell over the room, the smacking noises broke off.

On seeing that Graham had stopped moving, the vice president grinned.

"...Will that do, sir?"

When he heard those words, which were practically a taunt, the man's formerly expressionless face underwent a dramatic change.

"Heh-heh, ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAah, I get it! Yeah, yeah, I feel incredibly, massively refreshed! Man, oh man, to think you'd tell me all about stuff from two years ago, when you coulda told me that last bit without the rest! I got well and truly used, huh! You used me as an excuse to tell a long-winded yarn to that little girl over there!"

He didn't sound particularly angry, though. He actually seemed to be enjoying the situation.

"No," the information broker said. "That was a bonus for an esteemed customer. If you are bound for Chicago, I thought you would do well to remember the story I've informed you of."

"Ha-ha...ha-ha-ha! That's rich. Information brokers these days are way too good! How do you know all those fiddly little details? Yeah, you nailed it: I'm on my way to do a job in Chicago. And yeah, the Russo Family execs were spouting stuff about immortals and Huey Whatsitforet! I'm still on the fence about whether to believe that immortality stuff, though!"

The oppressively tense atmosphere of a few moments ago was completely gone. Graham's mood was so bright, it made one worry that he'd laugh too hard and burst a blood vessel.

"Still, that story did cheer me up. It really took me back. That's so true it's almost too true. Ahh, wow, today is such an interesting day! The emotion that lets humans find all of creation interesting is both the biggest virtue and the biggest flaw God gave us! Ha! I hope that *red-eyed, fanged-up* fella they hired as a bodyguard the other day is as interesting as you and Jacuzzi and the rest of 'em!"

Twirling a rough industrial tool in a jaunty, carefree way, the man hummed, draining the cup of cold black tea he held in his left hand.

“Damn. That’s good. Tea tastes right when it’s cold, as I always say. Did you tell me that long yarn because you knew? Well, whatever. In that case, as promised, I’ll let you people off the hook. Actually, I don’t even feel like pulling a robbery anymore.”

As Graham stood, getting ready to leave the compartment, the *Daily Days* vice president took a sip of his own cold tea and added an unnecessary comment.

“Oho... In gratitude for the compliment you paid the tea, then, let me give you a bit of information, on the house. If you step into the corridor, in the next first-class compartment in the direction of the locomotive, there is a fat man with a little moustache... I hear that he always carries a large amount of cash and jewels around with him, so that he may parade his wealth in front of others. He is most likely the affluent individual of ill repute of whom you heard. How you utilize this information is entirely up to you...”

At the vice president’s words, Graham frowned for a moment—but he promptly smiled again and flung open the door to the corridor.

“Hunh... Well, it’s a wire I got for free. I doubt I can trust it, but... I guess I’ll go check it out. All right, it’s time you fellas got up, too! It was blindingly obvious that you woke up while that guy was talking,” Graham said to the men who’d been lying near the door.

They sat up slowly, wearing rather odd expressions. The one who’d gotten to his feet first rubbed the back of his head.

“W-we’re still gonna do this? Let’s just call it off, okay?”

His complaint would be considered by most to be the correct approach.

Still, the man in coveralls had issues that made social norms irrelevant for him.

“Nah, no worries. I’m not hurt yet.”

“What’s with that logic?! Uh, ’scuse me, Mr. Information Broker or whatever you are, let me have a cup of that tea, too.”

“You’ve got some brass balls yourself! Well, whatever. Finish that fast and catch up,” Graham said, wrapping up that extremely self-centered conversation as he headed out into the corridor, dragging his other two companions with him.

The lone thug who’d stayed behind poured himself some tea, directing a very bright smile at the vice president.

He hit his head very hard back there. Did it make him go a little funny? Carol thought as she looked at the young delinquent who seemed to feel no fear or animosity toward the vice president, but—

“Ah, I’m terribly sorry about that,” the thug said. “I never even dreamed you’d be on board, Mr. Gustav.”

—his tone was drastically different from what it had been a moment ago. He lowered his head deferentially, still holding the cup

in one hand.

Huh?

The vice president's eyebrows came together, and he regarded the delinquent who'd abruptly called him by name.

“Well, well... You're...Sham, yes? You startled me. *I wasn't expecting to find you here, too.*”



“Mm, well, don’t tell Master Huey.”

“...So you’ve finally begun to voluntarily expand your range of activity? There’s *your side business of providing information to us as well...* Do you intend to lead Huey Laforet and even Nebula around by the nose?”

“No, I’m grateful to Master Huey, and I respect him, too. I merely want to enjoy my freedom to the fullest. After all, Master Huey isn’t the only human I’ve taken a liking to.”

Huey? Is this the same Huey that came up in that story a minute ago? ...The terrorist? Carol was terribly confused.

Meanwhile, the delinquent who’d been called Sham continued, still smiling.

“Mr. Graham is... Well, he’s a dangerous fellow, but he’s interesting. I mean, he really is scary, and I do not recommend ever taking a blow to the stomach from that wrench, but...to sum it up, he’s both good and bad, in a way.”

When he’d gotten that far, they heard Graham say “We’re done here. Let’s scram!” out in the corridor, and Sham hastily chugged the rest of his tea.

“He works fast, too... Well then, if you would, please do keep our little exchange of information a secret from Master Huey!”

Almost before he’d finished speaking, he opened the door, met up with the figures that were booking down the corridor—and they made for the rear of the train, their receding footsteps mimicking the way they had sounded when they’d first appeared.

During all these conversations, Carol hadn’t been able to do or say anything. Inside the first-class compartment, only stillness remained, as though nothing had happened at all.

“...Confused, are you? Well, encounters with new information are accompanied by more than a little confusion. The details about him... should probably wait until you are rather more accustomed to information.”

The storm had passed.

To Carol, it had been a storm of mysteries and terror.

She tried to make sense of the things that had happened there, but the more she thought about them, the more jumbled the inside of her head became.

Possibly because it was hard for the vice president to just sit by and watch her, he took a sip from a fresh cup of tea before prompting her, “If there is something you would like to ask, be my guest.”

“Huh?”

He'd addressed her abruptly, and besides, there were so many things she wanted to ask that she had no clue where to begin.

For some reason, she was struck by the illusion that she was being rushed, and what she did say was less a question than a direct verbalization of what she felt.

"A-are you sure that was all right?! Inciting a crime?!"

"Long ago, Turner—the man in the next compartment—scoffed at the information I gave him and refused to pay, then used that information shrewdly and made a killing with it. Therefore, while illegal, this was justifiable retaliation, and...well, it served him right."

"I think that's misusing your power!"

"All right, is there anything else you'd like to ask?"

They were hearing a man's crude screams from the next compartment, but the vice president ignored both the yells and Carol's retort, moving to change the subject by encouraging more questions.

"Um... Then, if Graham had gotten mad, Vice President...could you have beaten him?"

Who had that Sham fellow been? What were Huey and the immortals? There were all sorts of things she should have asked, but emotionally charged questions slipped out before the logical ones could.

In response, the vice president analyzed the earlier situation quite calmly.

"If he had assaulted us in earnest, I cannot speak for myself, but you would certainly have died. My field is intellectual labor. I leave the rough work to my capable subordinates."

"...Just say, *I'd protect you if it cost me my life*, okay? Just lie."

"The initial job of an information broker is to acquire an objective grasp of the facts. One may harbor illusions at one's leisure afterward... Hmm. In that case, since we have calmed ourselves, let us bask in illusion: In order to protect you, a precious staff member, no doubt I would cast my own life aside. Probably."

"Aaaaaaah, I don't even know which part to pick on first!"

Carol had lost the desire to ask serious questions, and she turned her gaze to the window to stare at the rainbow. But there was no longer any rainbow to be seen, and when she was certain she'd spotted a cityscape bristling with skyscrapers in the distance, a new question welled up inside her.

"...What's about to happen in Chicago?"

"I couldn't say. We information brokers aren't privy to future results. We merely think and speculate."

Picking up the thread of the conversation they'd been having before the robbers' intrusion, the vice president also gazed quietly at the approaching buildings.

“The surest thing is to confirm the facts with our own eyes. That is our job.”

“...Yes.”

“Your eyes, your camera, your skills: I’m counting on all of them.”

“—Yes, sir!”

There was no telling what had happened to the girl who’d been terrified of robbers a moment before.

Her childlike voice traveled through the window to echo clearly in the cloudless blue sky.

1934—the year after Prohibition was lifted.

Under the American sky, where society had taken its first steps into a new era, another train sped toward an enormous city.

Toward the stage of the next incident: Chicago. Or perhaps beyond it— San Francisco, the home of Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary.

Would they be onlookers to that incident? Or would they be direct participants?

No one knew their destiny, as the sound of the train’s vibrations clattered through the sky.

That warped, rhythmic noise seemed to be scoring the sound of her fate.

Clickety-clack, clickety-clack, clickety-clack...

To Baccano! 1934

Digression & Terminal The Linking World

January 1, 1932 Somewhere in New York

“Now you’ve done it, you piece of shit!”

Kicking open the door to the interrogation room, Victor walked in, his face dark with anger.

“What’s the matter?”

“Shut the hell up; you know what’s the matter! That was you, wasn’t it?!”

“What was?”

Huey looked genuinely mystified, and Victor yelled, his temples twitching.

“Turner, that whiskered pig on the Flying Pussyfoot, came to the Bureau to lodge a complaint today! *He says I conned him* on that train!”



An hour earlier

“I’m telling you, boy, give me the details on a man named Victor Talbot! Public servants are duty-bound to fulfill the requests of an eminent citizen like myself, correct?!”

A fat man with a moustache howled, sending spittle flying. He was dressed from head to toe in designer brands, as if his clothes were wearing him, rather than the other way around.

The man who was helping him tried, as calmly as he could, to make sense of the other man’s statement.

“All right, calm down, please. Erm, what exactly did this Victor Talbot do to you?”

“It was on the Flying Pussyfoot. After that cook and the others ran me out of the dining car, he saw a vulnerable man and took advantage. He called himself Victor, a former member of the Bureau, and he conned me out of my jewels and money! He said he’d protect me and made me pay him to be a bodyguard, and all he did was hand me a shotgun someone had dropped! Dammit! What the hell kind of training did you give him, huh?!”

“...Do you remember what this former agent Victor Talbot looked like?”

“I’ll recognize him if you bring him to me! I know he’s real! I did my research, so you can’t fool me!”

The rotund whiskered man yelled forcefully, and the Bureau employee sighed.

“Haaah... Uh, the thing is, we’ve already brought him to you.”

“Whuh?”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Victor Talbot.”

“Wha...?!”

“Now, take your time and tell me exactly what this phony Victor Talbot looked like.”



“And then the gink said he couldn’t really remember the guy’s face, so I had to smile and nod and wish him a lovely, lovely day. Do you have any idea how it feels having to make nice to a scumbag like him? Huh?”

After he’d filled Huey in on what had happened, Victor let him feel the full brunt of his anger.

“I bet you snuck more of your goons onto that train besides the Lemures! Then you had one of ’em use my name to get me in trouble... You must have! Why else would you give my name?!”

“You have a persecution complex, Victor, and you give yourself far too little credit. I do consider you a potential threat, so if I were to malign you, I would be far more ruthless and thorough. A bomb might be involved, at the very least.”

“Wha...?”

It was impossible to tell whether he was being complimented or mocked, but Victor assumed the latter. His fists trembled.

Huey watched him pensively for a while, and then—

“Did you know that two years ago in Germany, they created a machine called an electroencephalograph?”

“Huh?”

Huey had abruptly switched to a completely different topic.

Ordinarily, Victor would have erupted in justifiable anger, but he let the other man continue. Perhaps he had been distracted by the word *electroencephalograph*.

“It’s a medical instrument with a fascinating concept to its creation: It makes it possible to view the wavelengths inside the human skull. They’ve learned that human minds, thoughts, and even dreams may all be no more than exchanges of electrical signals in the

brain. The speed at which civilization evolves is truly fascinating. We've finally reached an age in which we can analyze human hearts and souls. Don't you agree, Victor?"

"What are you getting at?"

"And yet even when humans are beginning to understand themselves on that level, their actual essence hasn't made much progress. Even the longest human lives are short. I used to wonder if humanity's resistance to change is because they don't have the time to absorb and learn from the long history that has built our society."

"?"

Further confusing Victor, Huey impassively related his own thoughts:

"If all humans became immortal, their physical evolution would stop, but would their spirits evolve? There was a time when I wondered about that as well, but...perhaps a mere three centuries isn't enough to correct a twisted, malicious character."

"Yeah, you hit the nail on the head, all right! You're living proof! Hell, Maiza's a goddamn gangster, and I might still be able to talk sense into him, but you? I bet not even another thousand years will be enough to straighten out your twisted soul! And between you and Elmer—"

Watching as Victor launched into a loud and endless litany of complaints, Huey brooded privately.

To think he'd take the trouble of using an immortal's name as his alias.

I imagine he's about the only one who'd play such a game—and that's what it is to him.

He hasn't changed a bit, and no doubt he never will.

No—that bastard will never change.

...Never. Not since he killed Monica.



A few days later New York, Central Park

Two days after the momentous one on which Jacuzzi had encountered Graham's gang, and Chané and Claire had reunited...

...a man sat on a park bench, skimming a newspaper article.

It was in the *Daily Days*, issued by one of New York's lesser newspaper companies.

Suicide or Murder? Aspiring Actor Dies Mysteriously After Fall from Apartment Window

As he read the smaller article, the man murmured to himself.

“Good grief. I thought I’d made it look like an obvious suicide, but these third-rate papers are trouble. They insist on stirring up questions,” the man muttered, sighing.

His behavior was perfectly normal, and he blended completely into the background of the park.

However, what he said was not what most would say in the course of a normal day.

“Maybe I should have come back on another day and sent him to the bottom of the river after all.”

As he murmured, the man neatly folded the paper and slowly got up from the bench.

“Well, that’s all right. I learned that there are lots of playthings in New York, too.”

There was no one around, but the man spoke as if trying to convince himself.

His bangs completely covered both his eyes, and although it was possible to read his expression from his lips, he never let others see what lay behind it.

“What did he say his name was? ...Upham? That boy’s stance regarding immortals was rather intriguing.

“If I have him and Czes play together, things may get a bit interesting.”



That same day Fred’s hospital

“

those types yourself, right?”

“...Could be.” Upham let nothing show on his face.

Perplexed, Who muttered, “Actually... Have I seen you somewhere before?”

“I dunno. I don’t think I’m very distinctive.”

After that self-deprecating remark, Upham tacked on another phrase, baiting the other man.

“Just like you.”



A few minutes after Upham had gone, as if to take his place, another man entered.

“Hi there. Is Fred in?”

“Oh. You, huh?”

Without preamble, Who gave the beaming man the report he wanted:

“The doc and I both checked medical files and client addresses and things, but we didn’t turn up anything about that old guy, Szilard.”

“Wow, really? That’s too bad. Fred knows a lot of people, so I thought it might be worth a shot.”

“Well, finding a guy with nothing to go on but his name and age would be a tough one even for the cops. I dunno what you’re after here, but there’s no telling how many years it’s gonna take.”

Who didn’t know whether to be annoyed or impressed, and the other man smiled foolishly.

“Yeah, but no matter how many decades or centuries it takes, I plan to keep searching for him.”

““Centuries”? Look, fella...”

It didn’t even work as a joke. Who smiled wryly, and the beaming man shrugged and murmured as if this was the real joke.

“Fortunately, time is the one thing I’ve got.

“It’s also the only thing I’ve got, but anyway...”



Now then, if that's how things stand, I think I'll leave town for a while.

Tossing the newspaper into a trash can, the man slowly began to walk.

If I stay here, there's no telling when I might run into that smile junkie pervert again. In that case, I should devote myself to making preparations. The more meticulous the preparations, the more enjoyable the festival.

That's right... After all, the best parades are loud and garish.

I'll stay quiet and whet my knife until Huey gets out of prison. That way, I won't miss my chance to tear into a truly delicious meal.

Up until that point, his musings had remained locked in his heart. However, the last phrase slipped out as audible words, possibly because he'd grown unable to endure the pleasure.

“Who shall I put on the menu...? I'll think about that after the festival's begun.”

Heard by no one, the words disappeared into the streets of New York, exuding a hopeless malice into the atmosphere.

The era was beginning to couple the distant past to the present.

The connection was directed by the many histories inscribed by the immortals who lived in all eras—

—and by the humans who lived in each of them.



BACCANO!

From *Baccano!* 1710
To *Baccano!* 1935



AFTERWORD

Hello. It's been a long time. This is Narita.

Now then, this is the third volume of *Baccano! 1931* —but in terms of *Baccano!* as a whole, it's Volume 14, which makes it an irregularity.

Those of you who bought this book on impulse just because you stumbled upon it may have found some parts of it confusing.

“Who are the odd characters that showed up for the first time this time?”

“Who's the nutcase who keeps saying ‘Smile, smile?’”

“Who's that weird agent with the glasses?”

“What's with the perverse reprobate?”

...I'd highly recommend that everyone asking these questions read through the previously published volumes in the *Baccano!* series.

And to those of you who've been reading *Baccano!* for ages already: Thank you so much for sticking with me for fourteen whole volumes! This book is a reworking of the *Deadhead* story, which I wrote as a drama CD bonus three years ago, with about a hundred additional pages' worth of new content added to it.

That was the story that the OVA episodes of the anime are based on, and it also had the scene where Graham first appeared, so this time, it's been released as an official volume. I hope those of you who read *Deadhead* when you listened to the drama CD enjoy it again as its novel-sized version.

I think the next *Baccano!* is going to be *1710*.

That's the story where the twisted, black-hearted aficionado of “cute things” finally comes into his own, so I'm preparing to crank up the part of my brain that creates truly awful stories. I am only getting ready, so I don't know whether it will really run or not, in any case.

All right, from this point on, instead of *Baccano!*, I'm going to be talking about what I can probably call “current events”—

Readers, I have an announcement to make.

A manga adaptation...

That's right, they're turning my work into a comic!

Get this: My *DRRR!!* is going to be running as a manga in Square

Enix's *Monthly G Fantasy* magazine!

Heh-heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

It's been over half a year since they first told me about that project. Every time I saw comments online like *It's just not possible to turn DRRR!! into a manga*, or *I bet it won't happen unless his sales numbers go up*, I thought, *Heh-heh-heh... You people have misread the times!* and got the urge to release the information on my own website. Whenever I saw comments like *I wish they'd make a manga of DRRR!!* I thought, *Thank you very much! It's happening! You'd better believe it's happening...!* and again I got the urge to make the announcement myself. Naturally, due to the rules of nondisclosure, I couldn't. Now that I think about it, that would have been way too immature, so I suppose I should probably be grateful for that obligation to keep quiet... And actually, I get the feeling I wrote the exact same thing, working from the exact same train of thought, back when they decided to make *Baccano!* into a manga. You'd think I hadn't grown at all.

However, even if I haven't grown, my work has undergone the growth of turning into a manga!

It's all thanks to everyone who's supported me!

I hope you'll continue to stick with *Baccano!*, *DRRR!!* and my other series from here on out!

In any case, they'll be releasing details about the manga gradually, so sit tight for now!

...Hmm. That was all about recent events, but it turned into an ad.

Well, my current events consist of either writing manuscripts, gaming, or physical breakdowns, so aside from advertisements, I don't have much to write... If my impressions of games or movies will do, I think I could write any number of pages, but I don't think anybody would benefit from that. I doubt anybody wants to hear stories about how I went to buy a DSi or PSP-3000 at midnight on the day they were released; or telling the one about the time I used a powerful light and the sort of mirror dentists use and managed to actually see my own vocal cords and piriform sinuses all by myself is out of the question.

My days are a bust: Since nothing about my daily routine is interesting, I have fun creating interesting, out-of-the-ordinary stuff as a reaction.

I've even run out of things to talk about in my afterwords. Will there be a tomorrow for me?

...Was there really a yesterday? I'm not sure, so I just keep writing.

*And now for the usual thank-yous.

To my editor, Wada-san (Papio), for whom I'm constantly making trouble. To Supervising Chief Editor Suzuki and the rest of the editorial department. To the copy editors, for whom I'm always causing problems by being late, every single time. To the designers, who make my books look good. To the people of the publicity department, the printing department, the marketing department, and ASCII Media Works as a whole.

To my family, friends, and acquaintances, who always take care of me in all sorts of ways, and particularly to everyone in S City.

To Katsumi Enami, who drew new color pictures in spite of a busy schedule instead of reusing the ones from the drama CD bonus.

And to all the readers...

Thank you very much!

December 2008

“Crying about how I want the power to write
a clever afterword” Ryohgo Narita

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